

## ■ ISSUE 8.1 (SPRING 2019)



### Editors' Introduction: Opening Access

Robert Carley, Stefanie A Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula



### Context and Organization: Situating Antonio Negri's *Factory of Strategy* in the Contemporary Debate concerning the Party Form

Douglas Spielman



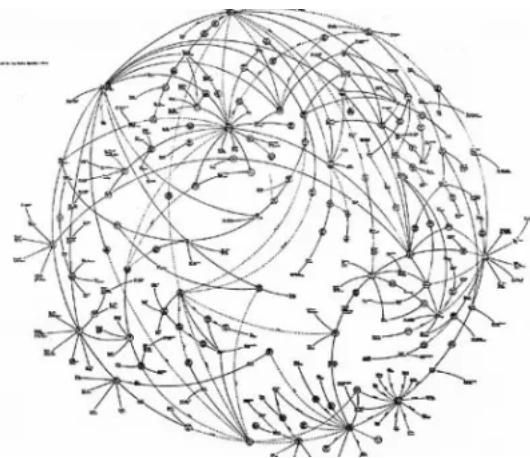
### The Rationalization of Leisure: Marxist Feminism and the Fantasy of Machine Subordination

Lindsay Weinberg



### Sex Work and Social Media: Policy, Identity, and Privacy in Networked Publics and Counterpublics

S. L. Nelson



## When Shock is No Longer Shocking: The Role of Seduction in Revitalizing Benjamin's Dialectical Image Under Late-Capitalist Conditions

AK Thompson



## Aestheticizing the City Through Storytelling and Walking: Dublin's 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour

YJ Hwang



## Disruptions—An interview with Jacques Rancière

Dwaipayan Chowdhury with Jacques Rancière

## ■ FORUM: UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME



## Historicizing Basic Income: Response to David Zeglen

Daniel Zamora and Anton Jäger



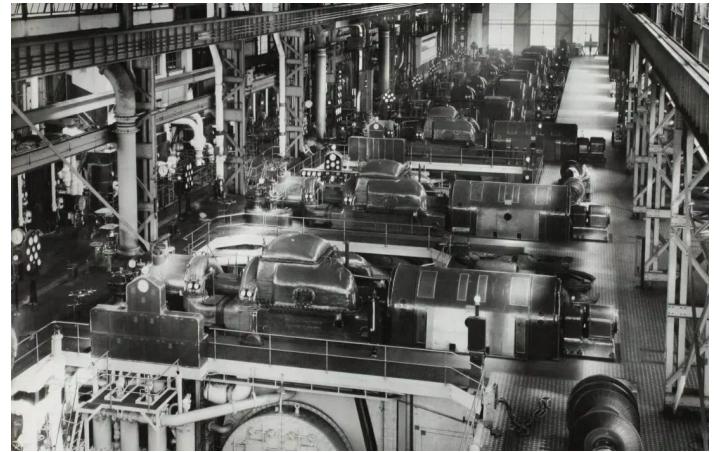
## Response to Lindsey Macdonald's "We are All Housewives: Universal Basic Income as Wages for Housework"

Tai Neilson



## Naturally Radical? A Response to Kimberly Klinger's "Species-Beings in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work"

John Carl Baker



## Response to Caroline West's "From Company Town Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income"

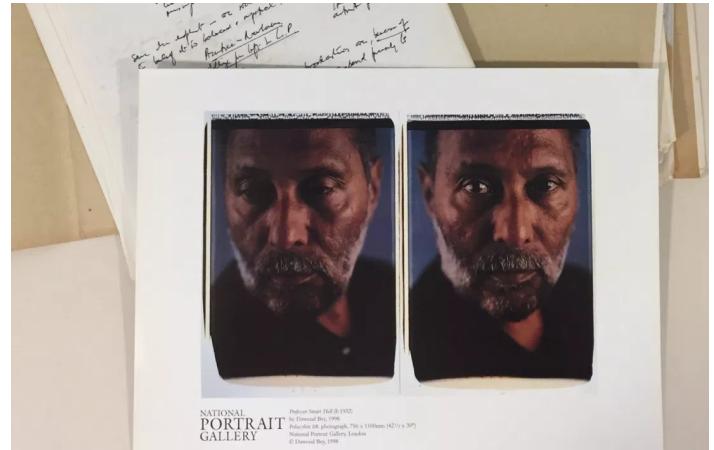
Richard Todd Stafford

## ■ YEARS IN CULTURAL STUDIES



### Introduction: Years in Cultural Studies

Robert W Gehl



### 1983—Stuart Hall Visits Australia and North America

Mariah L. Wellman

## ■ BOOK REVIEWS

*Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces* by Helen Kapstein (Rowman & Littlefield International)  
Reviewed by Yadira Gamez, May 2019

*Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* by Michel Feher (Zone Books)  
Reviewed by Wei-Ping Chen, May 2019

*Declarations of Dependence: Money, Politics, and the Aesthetics of Care* by Scott Ferguson (University of Nebraska Press)  
Reviewed by Brendan Cook, March 2019

*Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain* by Mohan Ambikaipaker (University of Pennsylvania Press)  
Reviewed by Helen Kapstein, February 2019

*Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy*, edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn (Palgrave Macmillan)  
Reviewed by Nick Marsellas, January 2019



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.

Robert Carley, Stefanie A Jones, Eero Laine, Chris Alen Sula, "Editors' Introduction: Opening Access," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.1>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Editors' Introduction: Opening Access

**Robert Carley, Stefanie A Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula**

**ABSTRACT** This introduction discusses the importance of open access scholarship and its relation to the academy. The introduction provides an overview of the articles in the journal, which include responses to the forum on universal basic income (UBI) published in issue 7.2. Finally, this issue marks the beginning of the Years in Cultural Studies project.

There is something underwhelming about the idea of 2019. Now ten years away from some of the lowest points of the last financial crisis, it's hard to see precisely where the crisis ever abated.<sup>1</sup> The past ten years seem to have taught two very different lessons of austerity—how to survive it or endure it, as the case may be for most, and how to leverage it for further political gains and profit, for those in positions to do so.

As we know, the university is not immune to the bad-faith logic of austerity markets, and the case of Stanford University Press provides a contemporary example. Stanford recently announced its decision to withdraw funding for the press, citing budget cuts due to lower return on its endowment. The amount that Stanford provides is less than half of the press' annual revenue, and the University no doubt continues to subsidize other programs that are expected to generate revenue, particularly, alongside alumni donations, in the case of athletics. As Cathy Davidson writes, "To declare 'austerity' now and blame a smaller than expected return on the University's endowment (the third largest in the country) as the rationale for cutting subsidy to a distinguished scholarly press is ludicrous and hypocritical. And *selective*."<sup>2</sup> After an outcry from the scholarly community, Stanford announced its decision to fund the press next year using "one-time funds."<sup>3</sup> The logic of austerity remains in place, as does its resultant demand that the press be self-sustaining in the near future. As austerity measures are applied to the otherwise exceedingly well funded, it should be clear that austerity now is not really about budgets, dollars, and cents, and that it is rather an ideological position with which to exert forceful control over communities that do not conform to increasingly impossible notions of profitability.

While university presses are indeed worthy of support—as worthy, if not more worthy than other initiatives—it should also be noted that many of them mirror commercial publishers who are in part responsible for the very financial stress that leads universities to invoke austerity measures in the first place. University libraries spend millions each year to maintain subscriptions to paywalled articles that have been written by faculty through the support of university resources and in some cases through taxpayer funds (though increasingly less so as states cut funding to higher education). At the hands of commercial publishers, much research remains inaccessible to others, sometimes even to colleagues and students at their own universities, and to many institutions considered periphery to US/EU markets that cannot afford these subscriptions in the first place. Notably, the University of California system recently cancelled its subscription to Elsevier, a major academic publisher, following hundreds of institutions in Germany and Sweden

over concerns about access to scholarship. It is still to be seen what impact this might have on the vast system of commercial academic publishing, or what alternatives might emerge.

While presses decry budget cuts and respond with increasing considerations for how to turn a profit, open access provides an alternative. This alternative is actually vital in a period when online content policing is both a daily business practice <sup>4</sup> and a matter of state policy.<sup>5</sup> While Tumblr and Twitter users may rage about how recently increased restrictions disproportionately target the left,<sup>6</sup> changes in the social media landscape are, from the perspective of capitalists, just business as usual. And that in and of itself is extremely telling, for the digital is, in many ways, still just business as usual. Sites, apps, and forms in which the left has invested, locations that have felt like community building and organizing, or like the practice of a radically new sociality, or like new outlets for the expression of oppositional cultures, have always been at the service of or subject to the control of capital. It is not surprising that they are now being more explicitly and deliberately directed towards corporate and statist ends.

A key recent example of how easily online leftist organizing can be destroyed is the FBI shutdown of Backpage, which came alongside the passing of SESTA and FOSTA. As Backpage was a site for commerce (and, as is also the case for many other online resources used for leftist organizing, there is no evidence that its CEO and site founders intended it for anything other than profit), it might at first seem to be an odd example of an anti-capitalist online space. Nonetheless, it was turned towards those ends by its users (intentionally or not), utilized as a site of worker control and autonomy from within the capitalist patriarchy's regime of wage and reproductive labor. Indeed, sex work operates as an epitomical site of capitalism, with laborers in this industry alongside temp workers (i.e. in the farming and shipping industries), and independent contractors (i.e. domestic workers) at the frontlines of capitalism's brutal exigencies. With the closure of Backpage, and elevated criminalization of consensual sex work through the accompanying laws, sex workers have faced increased labor demands,<sup>7</sup> physical violence, exploitation,<sup>8</sup> and poverty simultaneously.<sup>9</sup> While this leftist online resource was shuttered in the name of preventing sex trafficking (and it is obligatory to note that these laws do not actually stop the sex trafficking for which they are named), it is part of a long process of policing of sex and sexuality in the United States as part of the good Protestant asceticism that might be seen as the ideological underpinning of austerity budgeting.<sup>10</sup> The destruction of this site is one of the many ways in which a logic of restriction and asceticism is used to punish the most vulnerable, to make sure we knuckle under to the level of exploitation that capitalism would prefer to take from us. As a principle and a practice in opposition to such restriction, the value of open access as an ethos and a principle is clear.

Additionally, when we advocate for open access (for this journal and beyond), it has to be as part of a project against privatization on the broadest terms, informed by the complexities of how capitalism is lived. This is to say that sex work must be important when thinking about the infrastructures of the academy because the arenas are entangled under the structures that shape and control contemporary life. Open access is thus essential not simply as a moral stance, but because of the class relations of the academy. While full-time faculty members may be able to "pay what knowledge is worth," and students who are fortunate enough to attend an academic institution that subscribes to digital resources may make it through paywalls, this neglects the actual class hierarchy of the university, which relies heavily on the labor of adjuncts. Austerity budgeting in the university has not worked as a temporary mechanism to make it through difficult times; it has restructured the university so that it now depends on a significant pool of underpaid and under-remunerated laborers. These are not "short term solutions;" they are part of

the regular budgeting and decision making process. Austerity is thus designed to produce adjunctification, where those temp laborers carry the exigencies of capitalism in their bodies.<sup>11</sup> Austerity does not reduce costs and insecurities, but displaces these costs and insecurities onto adjuncts.

The fact that the academy is intimately racializing and classing is well documented.<sup>12</sup> Yet it bears restating, in perhaps another way: historically low-income and working-class people (not to be confused with the employed middle-class, however hard they might work), people with disabilities, and people from marginalized groups including and especially Black and Indigenous people of color and trans/queer people, can least bear these costs. Adjunctification acts as a wall that keeps these groups from flourishing in the academy. Of course, there are numerous academics who have “made it:” the exceptions that prove the rule, particularly for those who have enough economic resources to both embody bourgeois social codes and take personal economic risks such as moving or risking a semester without pay. Privatized research resources, beyond their cost in and of themselves, are a continuation of this expression of austerity logic as well: the deliberate exclusion and delegitimation of adjuncts and independent scholars in a classed, raced, abled, and gendered manner.

As Toby Miller has indicated, one of the most important offerings of cultural studies which remains powerful today is its capacity to “galvanize opposition to exploitation.”<sup>13</sup> In this spirit we argue that open access, then, should extend beyond simply making articles free and available on a journal’s website. It should also mean opening the academy: eliminating tuition, funding students for attending, converting all adjuncts to full time hires and eliminating adjunctification, support for students bridging institution to institution (undergraduate to graduate school, graduate school to employment), as well as deliberate programs to seek out, recruit, and retain students and faculty from communities historically underrepresented in the academy, especially those for whom the costs of the academy are too high to even consider entering.

This issue continues *Lateral's* tradition of open-access publishing and critical engagement with culture through several articles, part two of the forum on Universal Basic Income, book reviews, and the introduction of a new section.

In “[Context and Organization: Situating Antonio Negri’s ‘Factory of Strategy’ in the Contemporary Debate on the Party Form](#),” Douglas Spielman addresses the organizational impasse confronting the contemporary left regarding how it might effectively intervene in the polity. The debate on the party form, which finds its roots in Lenin’s work, was taken up by Antonio Negri, in the 1970s. However, Negri’s most complete consideration of Lenin’s writing on the party has only recently been translated as *Factory of Strategy: 33 Lessons on Lenin*. Spielman’s offers a reading of Negri’s text with a specific focus on the concept of class composition as a way to pursue his main claim that the Leninist party is a historically specific form of political organization that requires a historicizing concept to understand the limits and opportunities offered through it. At the end of the paper Spielman works his reading of Negri into a critical interpretation of and comparison with Jodi Dean’s endorsement of the party form. Dean’s original conception of the party, which is also reliant on Lenin, is perhaps the most significant driver of contemporary North American debates on the party form. Dean’s rigorous and original position on and defense of the party however differs from Negri’s approach to organizational questions. Spielman’s contribution robustly navigates contemporary debates regarding the party form and his wide-ranging reading of both Negri and Dean provides a methodological basis for analyzing contemporary issues regarding contemporary organizational questions.

In “[The Rationalization of Leisure: Marxist Feminism and the Fantasy of Machine Subordination](#)” Lindsay Weinberg works through genealogies of domestic labor, tying both historical and critical literatures to contemporary mechanisms of rationalizing women’s leisure. The article questions notions of women’s work and leisure broadly, and importantly marks clear connections between online activity and household work as spaces that often elude analyses of the spaces of wage labor and the workforce. Extending arguments stretching back to Wages for Housework, Weinberg’s explicitly Marxist feminist interventions open new space to understand and critique online activity and surveillance.

S. L. Nelson’s “[Sex Work and Social Media: Policy, Identity, and Privacy in Networked Publics and Counterpublics](#)” investigates the operation of normative publics and counterpublics in digital networks. Nelson uses qualitative, queer social research methodology to further explore how sex workers navigate surveillance and privacy within and between these sites. Finding that their subjects take a variety of actions to manage their identities and protect their privacy online, Nelson suggests that this vulnerable population’s ongoing performances of privacy act as one model for combatting today’s wide-spread internet surveillance.

In “[When Shock is No Longer Shocking: The Role of Seduction in Revitalizing Benjamin’s Dialectical Image Under Late-Capitalist Conditions](#)” A.K. Thompson offers a piercing analysis of the current conjuncture, particularly the rise of far-Right, Nazi, and nationalist movements around the world, and our collective incapacity to experience shock in the face of these developments. Thompson recalls Walter Benjamin’s dialectical mode of materialist analysis and action centered on the image. Benjamin identified particular images that had the unmediated capacity to shock viewers into recognizing their historic responsibilities; responsibilities that could only be met by politics. However, Thompson argues that although Benjamin’s concept of the dialectical image and the shock relation remains an essential departure point for understanding the role that culture plays in individual and collective political mobilization he asks how might we approach Benjamin’s insights regarding the dialectical image when shock is no longer shocking? Thompson reads the work of Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman to show how seduction might work as a concrete strategy to revitalizing our capacity to experience shock under late-capitalist conditions. Through a synthesis of Lombardi and Sherman’s work, Thompson argues for a new political art that would make it possible to grasp our individual and collective political subjectivity and—in the face of our collective inability to experience shock—to regain a capacity to act and struggle.

YJ Hwang looks at how the 1916 Easter Rising is transformed through the Irish tourism industry, especially through an associated walking tour, in “[Aestheticizing the City through Storytelling and Walking: Dublin’s 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour](#)” Hwang pays particular attention to the performative way the tour guide and his walking tour entangle the audience in the recreation of historical memory: the tour guide’s historical narrative, the tour’s shaping of social and architectural encounters with Dublin, and the collective recreation a particular geography of the rebellion through the process of walking together. Connecting theoretical work on tourism to reviews of the tour and a first hand account of the tour, Hwang demonstrates how tourism aestheticizes the city of Dublin itself.

In “[Disruptions](#)” Dwaipayan Chowdhury talked with Jacques Rancière to discuss the constraints that the context of modernity imposed on the expressions of the autonomous potential of art and how and why this produced a persistent and recurrent effect on aesthetics, experience, and politics. In the interview, Chowdhury approaches Rancière’s politics of aesthetics as a way to reimagine Schiller’s concept of aesthetics as a departure

point into politics. The foundation for the idea of “disruptions” is predicated upon an aesthetic experience that suppresses the modernist foundations of aesthetic experience; experiences divorced from a common existence. Chowdhury explains that in Rancière’s rearticulation of Shiller’s aesthetics as “a state of being” as, instead, “a state of the free” re-centers or becomes a systemic basis for a theory of aesthetics that recasts the autonomy of the artwork and aesthetic experience not as divorced from life but, rather, as creative political means to destruct the modernist impulses governing aesthetic experience. A state of the free signifies a departure from the aesthetic as an experiential trap grounded in modernity where art is reduced to the either history of its formalism or experienced as sublime affect—both of which, ungrounded historically and socially, reside outside of or beyond common existence. For Chowdhury, then, Rancière’s aesthetics does not deal with art per se but, rather, in his introduction to the interview, aesthetics becomes a means to common experience and its expression in politics—by treating the specific experience of art as a pure experience of art. The focus, then, is on the subjective experience of pure art where, for art to have any kind of experiential quality that is political and transformative, it requires a subjective self-suppression of art as it has been constituted and reconstituted in its modernist foundations. Chowdhury approaches Rancière’s politics of aesthetics through the self-suppression art that, seeking a form of expression, looks to something outside of itself that is experiential in quality. This process, then, places aesthetic experience in the pathway of translation—a mediation between the aesthetic experience and the contemporary world—aesthetics experience gets translated into an aesthetico-politics. The process or procedure of translation disrupts is the separation of art and life that autonomous art was dependent upon, for so long, in the various contexts within modernity, and after, where the autonomy of art is expressed, interpreted, and experienced as either the intensification and perfection of form, as a Hegelian metaphysics of “the idea,” or, even, as avant-gardist disruptions of the formal aspects of art—a war of position against bourgeoisie tastes. For Chowdhury, the tactic of disruption is a tactic captured through Rancière’s “aestheticization of common existence”. This is the point where the political and its transformative potential finds an experiential, subjective, and transformative basis through aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience, as a domain of affect, disrupts the modernist foundations of art primarily by destabilising its structures of judgment which, in modernity, only articulate the appraisal of the object through concepts that place art and aesthetics outside the domain of common existence.

This issue marks the introduction of a new, original, and ambitious project: [The Cultural Studies Timeline](#). In the framework of a single year, contributions interrogate the ways that scholarship, social movements, cultural phenomena, political events have had a direct impact on cultural studies. In this issue, [Rob Gehl](#) provides an introduction and overview of the project that marks the ways the project will proceed and calls for additional contributions and responses from *Lateral* readers. In the initial contribution to the timeline, [Mariah Wellman](#) approaches the year 1983 through Stuart Hall’s interventions into the nascent transdisciplinary formations that will later constitute a field of cultural studies in Australia and the United States. She also explores significant individual contributions that same year by James Carey, Geert Hofstede, Justin Wren-Lewis, and Richard Johnson.

Finally, this issue extends the UBI forum, introduced in issue 7.2, with responses from [Tai Neilson](#), [John Carl Baker](#), [Richard Todd Stafford](#), and [Daniel Zamora and Anton Jäger](#). These authors work through each inaugural contribution to the forum—either through conceptual categories, theoretical frameworks and intellectual traditions, constraints and possibilities for concrete policy-based transformations, or methods of historical and societal embeddedness. This forum operates in the spirit of a critical appraisal and conjunctural analysis of the political projects that contour contemporary discourses

around UBI, in theory and practice. In conversation with the original essays, these contributions shape how we might do UBI both by insisting on its material foundations, and challenging how we might take it up.

## Notes

1. Aimee Picchi, "A Decade After the Recession, 40% of U.S. Families Still Struggling," MoneyWatch, *CBS News*, May 13, 2019, accessed May 14, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/a-decade-after-the-recession-40-of-us-families-still-struggling/>. ↗
2. Cathy Davidson, "How a University Can Sell Its Soul: HASTAC's Stanford Origins and the University's Current Decision on Stanford University Press," *HASTAC*, April 28, 2019, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/cathy-davidson/2019/04/28/how-university-can-sell-its-soul-hastacs-stanford-origins-and>. ↗
3. Scott Jaschik, "Reprise at Stanford," *Inside Higher Ed*, May 1, 2019, accessed May 20, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/01/stanford-backs-down-year-ending-support-university-press>. ↗
4. Tumblr Staff, "A better, more positive Tumblr," December 3, 2018, <https://staff.tumblr.com/post/180758987165/a-better-more-positive-tumblr>; Aja Romano, "Tumblr is banning adult content. It's about so much more than porn," *Vox*, updated December 17, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/12/4/18124120/tumblr-porn-adult-content-ban-user-backlash>. For example, reflecting popular sentiment, Romano notes of the content ban that "marginalized communities that have built safe spaces may now be newly vulnerable." ↗
5. Such as the repeal of net neutrality. See, Keith Collins, "Net Neutrality Has Officially Been Repealed. Here's How That Could Affect You," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/11/technology/net-neutrality-repeal.html>. ↗
6. This sentiment is captured by Lizzie Dearden, "Neo-Nazi groups allowed to stay on facebook because they 'do not violate community standards,'" *The Independent*, March 24, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/facebook-new-zealand-neo-nazis-white-supremacists-a8837886.html>. ↗
7. Reporters note "a dramatic increase of street-based sex workers" after the passing of FOSTA, reflected a more labor-intensive process for acquiring clients. Lux Alptraum, "The Internet Made Sex Work Safer. Now Congress Has Forced It Back Into the Shadows," *The Verge*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/5/1/17306486/sex-work-online-fosta-backpage-communications-decency-act>. ↗
8. Such as increased subjection to pimps and other predatory figures, as argues April Glaser, "There Is No New Backpage," *Slate*, February 13, 2019, <https://slate.com/technology/2019/02/backpage-sex-workers-fosta-sesta-switter-tryst-trafficking.html>. ↗
9. Alptraum, "The Internet Made Sex Work Safer." ↗
10. INCITE! "Policing Sex Work," INCITE! Network website, accessed on May 10, 2019, <https://incite-national.org/policing-sex-work/>; see also the "Policing Sex Work Toolkit," accessed on May 22, 2019, <https://incite-national.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/toolkitrev-sexwork.pdf>. ↗
11. Adam Harris, "The Death of an Adjunct," *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/adjunct-professors-higher-education-thea-hunter/586168/>. ↗

12. TIAA, "Taking the measure of faculty diversity," April 2016,  
[https://www.tiaainstitute.org/sites/default/files/presentations/2017-02/taking\\_the\\_measure\\_of\\_faculty\\_diversity.pdf](https://www.tiaainstitute.org/sites/default/files/presentations/2017-02/taking_the_measure_of_faculty_diversity.pdf). 
13. Toby Miller, "What It Is and What It Isn't: Cultural Studies Meets Graduate-Student Labor," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 13, no. 1, (2001), 69.  
<https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1234&context=yjlh>. 

 [Bio](#)

### Robert Carley

Robert F. Carley is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station. He serves on the editorial board of *Sociological Focus: Journal of the North Central Sociological Association*, is co-coordinator of The Union for Democratic Communications, and is a co-editor of *Lateral: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*. He is the author of *Culture and Tactics: Gramsci, Race, and The Politics of Practice* (SUNY Press 2019), *Autonomy, Refusal, and The Black Bloc* (Rowman and Littlefield International 2019), and *Collectivities: Politics at the Intersections of Disciplines* (2016). In 2017, he received The North Central Sociological Association's Scholarly Achievement Award for his article "Ideological Contention: Antonio Gramsci and the Connection between Race and Social Movement Mobilization in Early 20th Century Italy" (2016).

 [Bio](#)

### Stefanie A Jones

SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ's research explores war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

 [Bio](#)  [Twitter](#)

### Eero Laine

Eero Laine is an Assistant Professor at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

### [Chris Alen Sula](#)

Chris Alen Sula is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Digital Humanities and Data Analytics & Visualization at Pratt Institute's School of Information. He teaches graduate courses in digital humanities, information visualization, critical theory, and community building and engagement. His research applies visualization and network science to humanities datasets, especially those chronicling the history of philosophy. He has also published articles on citation studies in the humanities; the connection between digital humanities, libraries, and cultural heritage institutions; the politics of technology; and ethical and activist uses of visualization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Douglas Spielman, "Context and Organization: Situating Antonio Negri's *Factory of Strategy* in the Contemporary Debate on the Party Form," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.2>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Context and Organization: Situating Antonio Negri's *Factory of Strategy* in the Contemporary Debate on the Party Form

**Douglas Spielman**

**ABSTRACT** This paper begins by observing a tension in contemporary political discourse on the left: against a backdrop of social movements that prioritize "horizontal" organizational structures, there has been a renewed academic debate on the relevance of Lenin and the party form. In this paper I look at Antonio Negri's recently translated *Factory of Strategy: Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin* (a work based on a collection of lectures originally delivered by Negri in the 1970s). I suggest that Negri's intervention can make a significant contribution to this debate, one that—without rejecting the Leninist project as such—reframes what it would mean to appropriate Lenin for today. By focusing on Lenin's method of political analysis rather than his specific form of organization, I argue that Negri recovers from within Lenin's writing a set of categories that can themselves provide the terms for a critique of contemporary Leninism. For Negri, this entails showing how Lenin's system contains the means by which to theorize its own supersession. In presenting a theory of political intervention that is able to reflexively analyze its historical conditions of possibility, I suggest that Negri's work on Lenin embodies several important theoretical and methodological commitments. This paper's concluding section looks at recent work by Jodi Dean and critically interprets her endorsement of the party form in light of Negri's intervention.

It is useful to begin by observing a tension in contemporary political discourse. On one hand, the last several years have seen an upsurge in social movements built around organizational forms that emphasize horizontality, inclusivity, and direct democracy. These movements (Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter are perhaps the most prominent examples in the North American context) have often consciously opposed traditional forms of political mediation, defining themselves in part by their autonomy from those institutions that have historically been called upon to represent the demands of progressive social movements, including political parties, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations. On the other hand, however, we can observe an emergent countertendency. In the aftermath of these struggles there have been a number of calls for the movements to abandon their organizational experiments and to assume more traditional models of political leadership and representation. These calls have been diverse in content, ranging from endorsements of the Democratic Party to appeals for a renewed emphasis on Leninist style party building—it is this latter tendency that I address in the current paper. Thus against a backdrop of social movements that have prioritized "horizontal" organizational forms there has emerged a renewed debate on the contemporary relevance of Lenin and the Leninist conception of the party, a conception that in certain respects runs counter to the radically democratic initiatives that were the centerpiece of this most recent cycle of struggles.<sup>1</sup> In what follows I look at how we ought to think about these recent endorsements of Lenin's party model, and how they relate to broader questions about movement organization and leadership. Drawing primarily upon Antonio Negri's work from the 1970's, as well as more general reflections on the tradition of Italian "autonomist Marxism," I survey a particular approach to evaluating the relevance of the party form. This paper can, therefore, be understood as a reflection on

method. It is an attempt to clarify a certain means by which to approach the problem of the party, as well as organizational questions more broadly.

The thesis developed here is ultimately a simple one: the Leninist party should be viewed as a historically specific form of political organization, one that cannot be unproblematically transferred out of its initial context. This is an idea I explicate primarily via a reading of Antonio Negri's recently translated work on Lenin, first published in English in 2014 under the title *Factory of Strategy: Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin*. Although based on a series of lectures delivered by Negri in the early 1970's (and originally published in Italian in 1978), this work has not previously been available in English, and has yet to feature prominently in recent North American debates on Lenin's work.<sup>2</sup>

My goal in what follows is to use Negri's reflections on Lenin in a twofold manner. First, I aim to situate Negri's interpretation within contemporary debates on the party by elaborating the unique features of his writing on this question. Second, I hope to explicate the broader theoretical architecture that supports the "autonomist" account of organization (an account that informs Negri's work), paying specific attention to the concept of "class composition."

There are two further points that should be mentioned at the outset. First, in this paper I focus primarily on a mode of theoretical analysis, one that is applied to the party, as well as to organizational questions more generally. I present several categories for carrying out such an analysis and offer a general schema for relating these categories. Given this, the current paper is more theoretical than it is empirical. Nonetheless, the central claims outlined here are, at least in principle, subject to empirical verification (and any fuller development of this project would require such verification). Second, in interpreting Negri's work and its relation to the autonomist tradition, I rely largely on older sources. Negri's recent writing—much of it produced in collaboration with Michael Hardt—has found a broad readership and its main conclusions (for example, about "empire," the "multitude," and "immaterial labor") have been widely commented upon. Thus, while there exists a large literature (both in cultural studies and beyond) analyzing these works, somewhat less has been written on their theoretical origins, and less still looking at the complex relation between these origins and debates around the party form.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first reviews a representative sample of contemporary literature discussing the party form and its relation to Marxian politics. The subsequent three sections focus on Negri and the autonomist tradition, while the final section looks at competing perspectives. Of the sections on Negri's work, the first explores his interpretive strategy in reading Lenin, and follows him in his exposition of several Leninist concepts. The next section takes a wider perspective, situating Negri's approach within the Italian autonomist tradition, paying specific attention to how the framework of 'class composition' informs his view on organization and the party. In the final section on Negri, I highlight key features of Lenin's context and briefly follow Negri in his suggestion that the context-specific features that once established the political adequacy of the party have been superseded. This paper's concluding section turns to recent work by Jodi Dean and critically interprets her endorsement of the party in light of Negri's intervention. Dean is perhaps the central reference point in contemporary North American debates on the party form. Her writing offers a rigorous and wide-ranging defense of the party and of its adequacy to the present. Paying specific attention to their differing methods for approaching organizational questions (and not simply the differing content of their proposals), I outline the most salient points of contrast between Negri and Dean. While I defend the merits of Negri's approach, I propose no settlement to the contemporary debate on Lenin and the party. My hope instead is that this intervention

may help clarify the terrain of disagreement, as well as elucidate methods for analyzing the problem of organization.

## ***Mapping the contemporary discussion***

A number of recent interventions have taken up the question of the party form and its relation to the current conjuncture. Often responding to a global cycle of struggle that includes the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity movements in Southern Europe, and the various occupations of public space that followed in the wake of the financial crisis, these interventions have tended to weigh party-building strategies against the perceived failure of these movements to sustain themselves by creating durable organizational structures.

Beyond this political context, several prominent publications have been key touchstones in the renaissance of academic work on the party. Discussions from the “Idea of Communism” conference and subsequent book series have been important reference points in the English-language debate, as have Bruno Bosteels’s *The Actuality of Communism* and Jodi Dean’s *The Communist Horizon*, as well as her more recent *Crowds and Party*.<sup>3</sup> While these works address many facets of contemporary anti-capitalist struggles, responses to the organizational question have been among the most contentious. An exhaustive survey of the debate they have prompted is well beyond the scope of the current paper. Some recent contributions are, however, worth mentioning as they help to situate the works I address in what follows.

One recurring question in this discussion pertains to the continued utility of the party in the face of changes in the structural features of global capital. Positions on this question may, at the broadest level, be divided into three groups: (1) those that suggest historical changes have rendered the party form inadequate to contemporary needs, (2) those that suggest historical changes have not fundamentally undermined the adequacy of the party, and (3) those that ground the necessity of the party in some non-historical feature of social or political life, and thus see the question of its relevance as fundamentally underdetermined by historical considerations. (There is, we may note in passing, a fourth possible position which holds, in a partial reversal of the third, that there are non-historical features of social life that render the party form always *inadequate*. Although I will say nothing about them here, many anarchist critiques proceed in this manner, suggesting, in essence, that the forms of political instrumentality, representation, and centralism endemic to parties are always counter to the aim of overcoming social domination.)

Against what he sees as the “common sense” perception that the party form has been “exhausted,” Gavin Walker argues for a re-evaluation of the “party-idea.”<sup>4</sup> Although he is hesitant to endorse a specific organizational model — and is skeptical of any dogmatic repetition of some historical form of the party — he ultimately offers a positive evaluation of the party on the following grounds: “The party-form is itself an insistence on the necessity of an affirmative and ruptural concept of politics, against the various tendencies that emphasize the spontaneous generation of politics from within the contemporary development of capitalism itself.”<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on the party as a necessary vehicle of political antagonism is a common refrain in contemporary endorsements of the party form. These endorsements frequently contend that the spontaneous character of contemporary movements renders them too diffuse and ephemeral to challenge existing structures of political and economic power.

Walker’s ultimate endorsement of the party draws its theoretical support from Alain Badiou’s work, particularly Badiou’s insistence in *Theory of the Subject* that “the party is the body of politics.” As Jason Smith has noted, however, Walker’s reading of Badiou strongly discounts the latter’s more recent suggestion that the party form has been

“saturated” and is thus inadequate to our needs in the current conjuncture.<sup>6</sup> With Walker, Dean, and others, Smith acknowledges the limitations of “horizontalist” models, arguing that contemporary movements must find mechanisms to both deepen the content of their demands and produce more consistent modes of coordination. He, however, stops short of endorsing a return to party building strategies. Whatever the specific conclusion reached, the crucial factor for Smith is that “the very posing of the question of the party-form can only take place with reference to, and indeed from within the dynamics of, contemporary struggles.”<sup>7</sup> Thus in a clear rebuke to ahistorical conceptions of the political, such as those found in Žižek’s work (as well as in the early Badiou), Smith rejects all *a priori* theories of the party.<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere Smith argues for a reevaluation of the political form of the commune (with the Paris Commune functioning as a privileged referent). The goal, as he writes, is to theorize “a conception of the commune as a form of organization that is a unit neither of administration nor of production: it is the name for a collective mode of existence in which the separation between the economic and the political, between living and struggling tends to disappear. And perhaps with it, the need and push for the party.”<sup>9</sup>

Joshua Clover and Aaron Benanav echo this imperative to ground any consideration of the party form within the historical contours of the present, as do Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson.<sup>10</sup> Both sets of authors note that the contemporary geographical distribution of capital (especially the disaggregation of industrial production through a growing reliance on global supply chain networks) has altered the composition of the contemporary working class in ways that challenge the adequacy of inherited party models. Clover and Benanav point to the deindustrialization of economies in the Global North as a crucial sign of a changing working class, and then take up the question of whether something like the traditional industrial proletariat may be found in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Although they observe a slight increase in the percentage of the workforce involved in industrial manufacturing within these countries, they emphasize that “patterns of peripheral industrialization have not replicated those of the core.”<sup>11</sup> Clover and Benanav thus conclude “The collective experience of work and life that gave rise to the vanguard party during the era of industrialization has passed away with industrialization itself.”<sup>12</sup>

Mezzadra and Neilson invoke similar concerns. Although they echo Jodi Dean’s skepticism regarding the utility of horizontalism and “micro-politics,” they claim that the party’s statist orientation limits its horizon of historical effectiveness. Under conditions of globally diffuse value production, they argue, “the state is not powerful enough to confront contemporary capitalism; in order to reopen politically a perspective of radical transformation, something else, a different source of power, is absolutely necessary.”<sup>13</sup>

One difficulty in the current debate is the ambiguity that is frequently attached to the notion of the “party form.” In certain instances it is invoked in the broadest sense to describe all left-leaning party formations, in others it is used more narrowly to describe Lenin’s party model, and in others still it is used to name the wider set of historical experiences associated with both the “Bolshevized” Communist Parties of the Third International, as well as later Maoist inspired groups. In light of this ambiguity, there is a great deal of work to be done disentangling these various histories and their relation to the contemporary debate. Although he does not specifically disambiguate these broader meanings, Peter Thomas usefully describes some of the diversity within modern theorizations of the party by tracing different approaches to the concept in the work of Lukács, Gramsci, and among the Italian autonomists. While Thomas suggests a party formation is necessary to advance the aims of contemporary social movements (and ultimately champions a rethinking of the Gramscian model), his work is perhaps most

useful for gesturing towards the wide range of possible instantiations of the party form. Thomas's intervention is further welcome for its insistence that the Italian autonomists have been too quickly – and indeed wrongly – categorized as anti-organizationalists. By recalling that the party question was actively debated among the Italian New Left, Thomson opens theoretical space for what is to follow.<sup>14</sup>

### ***How to read Lenin: Negri's methodological considerations***

While Negri has come to be strongly associated with a critique of the party form, his lectures are by no means a straightforward refutation of Lenin's theoretical insights (many of which he defends quite enthusiastically). It is thus useful to begin with a note on how he reads Lenin's work. Here we might provisionally describe Negri's reading as a Leninist critique of Leninism. That is, rather than read Lenin in relation to some transhistorical normative criterion and then, on this basis, offer an ethico-political critique of the party form, Negri engages Lenin in order to recover, from within Lenin's own writing, categories that can themselves provide the terms for a critical contextualization of Leninism. Negri's reading, then, has two characteristic features that are worth highlighting: (1) it resists applying an external standard to Lenin's work, opting instead to show how his system already contains the categories by which to theorize its own supersession; (2) it emphasizes historical discontinuity, foregrounding the temporal gap that separates Lenin from the contemporary conjuncture. Critically, the second is carried out with terms derived from the first. The historical discontinuity that separates Lenin's time from ours is theorized (at least in part) with categories of historical analysis derived from within Lenin's writing.

For Negri, the choice to read Lenin in this way is not arbitrary. It is instead a theoretically informed method of reading that, he suggests, follows from a Marxist commitment to historical specification. Thus he writes at the outset of his study, "one of the most salient aspects of Marxist discourse on Marxism is the assumption of its own essential discontinuity and the discontinuity of its real referent."<sup>15</sup> And as he later clarifies, "only by recognizing the shifts, leaps, and discontinuity that worker's theory is forced to confront can we call ourselves Leninist and use Leninist models of organization."<sup>16</sup>

Negri's task, therefore, is to conceptualize historical discontinuity in Leninist terms. He finds several means to do this, but perhaps most significant among them—especially in the first third of his study—is the concept of a "determinate social formation," which Negri locates in Lenin's early writing on Russian economic development.<sup>17</sup> This category delimits a concrete sphere of historical analysis, the specificity of which must be read in distinction to other more abstract and historically general categories in Marxist theory, such as a "mode of production." While the latter marks discontinuities within a long expanse of historical time, allowing one, for example, to distinguish between a feudal and capitalist mode of production, it effectively fixes (through abstraction) a set of productive relations that are understood to remain more or less invariant for extended historical periods. It has, in this respect, an ideal character and therefore doesn't immediately correspond with, or describe, an actually existing society.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, the notion of a "determinant social formation" registers spatiotemporal discontinuities within and between modes of production, forcing us to continually analyze how productive relations are concretely articulated in a given time and place.<sup>19</sup> In a social formation elements of different historical modes of production may be combined and co-present – albeit always in uneven ways. We can thus observe that in pre-revolutionary Russia elements of feudal modes of agricultural production existed alongside modern industry and wage labor, as well as small-scale forms of pre-industrial manufacturing. Crucially, this combined presence does not negate the proposition that one form of

production is dominant and at the leading edge of economic development within the social formation. On Negri's reading, part of the Leninist method involves isolating this dominant tendency as a primary point of political intervention.<sup>20</sup>

While the 'determinant social formation' becomes significant in Negri's text, the mere introduction of such a category is not sufficient to establish what is unique in Lenin's method. It establishes a category of historical analysis, but not a concrete means for viewing and reconstructing the actual historical situation, much less for formulating strategic considerations adequate to it. Negri is clear, then, that Lenin's innovation involved a second component: an insistence on analyzing the determinate social formation from the viewpoint of a revolutionary subject. Thus Negri continues, "we are Leninists insofar as from within our contemporary determinate situation we affirm a class standpoint geared toward subversion."<sup>21</sup>

It is, however, vital for Negri that this class standpoint and its subversive capacity not be reified. Affirmation of the class standpoint is not bought at the expense of a commitment to historical specificity. The subjective coordinates of the class are not external to the social formation, but are themselves historically variable and, therefore, must be analyzed in terms of their specificity within it. As Negri writes, "in Lenin...the crucial problem is that of the determinacy of the revolutionary subject *and its temporal and spatial constitution*."<sup>22</sup> Even more insistently on the next page Negri warns that: "the continuity of the subversive subject elected as its referent by Marxist science must reckon with the discontinuity of the determination of the subject and the dialectical variation of the material forms it takes."<sup>23</sup>

Thus the Leninist method requires us not only to evaluate the historical discontinuity of objective conditions, but also the subjective discontinuity (itself equally historical) of the class and its political expressions. To capture these methodological imperatives, Negri introduces the concept of "class composition" into his study. Although this is a concept more closely associated with Negri's theoretical context than Lenin's, his claim is that it has an implicit presence in Lenin's work. It is thus at this point—in the move from a merely descriptive account of the determinate social formation to the concrete analysis of the subjective forces within it—that we begin to see a more pronounced integration of categories from autonomist Marxism into Negri's work.

### ***Class composition in autonomist Marxism***

The concept of class composition names one of the central theoretical innovations of Italian autonomist Marxism from the 1960's and 70's, and can provisionally be understood to describe the social and political constitution of the working class under a given set of historical conditions. It offers, among other things, a conceptual means for analyzing the specific subjective forms assumed by the class in its dynamic relation to capital. We might thus begin our treatment by echoing Harry Cleaver's observation that while Marxist theoreticians had long taken an interest in the internal composition of capital and its development, they have said less about the elementary practices and social forms that characterize the working class.<sup>24</sup> The autonomist approach reverses this traditional emphasis on capital, shifting attention to the forces that—within a given conjuncture—lend consistency to working class organization and identity, and thus give the class its determinate form.

In many cases (and this is true of Negri's usage), an explicit division is made between the "technical composition" of the class and its "political composition". The former describes the objective contours assumed by the class within the labor process. These may include how class formations are shaped by the temporality of the workday, the application of particular technologies to production, and the managerial regimes that seek to regulate

(both materially and culturally) the modalities of social cooperation that animate production. In contrast, political composition describes the systems of resistance — both organized and spontaneous—that challenge capital’s command over production. Relevant considerations in this regard are also numerous, but include the nature of the organizational forms taken up by the workers’ movement, the particularities of the social demands being made, the level of commitment to inherited institutions—the party, the union, etc.—as well as the prevalence of informal acts of resistance, such as absenteeism and sabotage. As Negri writes, “The political composition of the proletariat is understood as the determination of the needs, comportments, and degrees of political consciousness manifested in the working class as a subject at a given historical conjuncture.”<sup>25</sup>

Two qualifications are essential to round out this description. First, although an analytic separation may be made between technical and political composition, the great innovation of the autonomist approach is to connect these two terms. As a framework for analysis, class composition represents an attempt to grasp the intimacy of these categories—of the technical and the political—in order to demonstrate their complex interaction.<sup>26</sup> To show, in other words, how particular forms of resistance correspond to specific expressions of the labor process (and vice versa). As Steve Wright notes in his history of Italian autonomism, the objective of class composition analysis is to reveal “the relationship between the material structure of the working class, and its behavior as a subject.”<sup>27</sup> On this approach, there is no transhistorical form of political organization (be it the union, the party, the workers’ council, etc.) that will in all instances be adequate to the needs of the class. Emphasized instead are the discrete practices by which class formations are continually recreated through the interplay of their technical and political compositions, emerging in each new iteration with different sets of capacities, demands, and organizational models.<sup>28</sup> As Cleaver suggests, the concept of class composition has “revealed the idealism of those Marxists who treat both the form of capital and the form of working-class organization as eternally given.”<sup>29</sup>

If the first qualification was that this analysis refuses a static dualism between technical and political composition, the second qualification is this: when viewed as a dynamic process, this type of analysis tends to foreground the active power of resistance and its ability to force capital into reorganizing production. That is, it assumes the anteriority of resistance to constituted power and thus inverts many traditional approaches, which take workers’ movements to be purely reactive with respect to capital’s development.<sup>30</sup> Using the terms already introduced, we may therefore suggest that political composition tends to both precede and condition technical composition. It is workers’ initiative in struggle that forces capital to restructure production in order to decompose emergent forms of workers’ power and the organizational networks that support them. From this perspective, then, the history of capital’s development, including the various technological and managerial innovations it has brought to bear on the labor process, can be viewed as responses to the cycles of workers’ struggle that punctuate history.

This insight—that working class resistance precedes and drives forward capitalist development—is central to the wider theoretical architecture of autonomist Marxism. Mario Tronti provides what is perhaps the classic formulation of this idea:

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital’s own reproduction must be tuned. [...] Our new

approach starts from the proposition that, at both national and international level, it is the specific, present, political situation of the working class that both necessitates and directs the given forms of capital's development.<sup>31</sup>

Labor, as Tronti would later frame it, is doubly productive: as labor-power set to work by capital it produces surplus-value, while as an agent of resistance, labor is productive in so far as it drives capital to revolutionize the production process itself. Labor is thus productive "at one time inside capital, and at another against capital."<sup>32</sup>

Several points must be mentioned in order to see the implications of this analysis for Negri's reading of Lenin. To begin, this view implies that we should understand capital as a social relation, rather than merely as an autonomous subject or object (as is the case in many non-Marxian understandings of the category). To suggest that capital is a social relation is in part to recognize that it must include labor within its internal composition, either continually subsuming labor or ceasing to be capital. Labor — when both freed of traditional bonds and without the means to ensure its own reproduction (and thus doubly free in Marx's sense) — is an existence-condition for capital. The contradiction, however, is that in its drive to bring labor into the production process, capital coheres within itself its own antagonist. Thus Tronti writes, "the working class should materially discover itself as a part of capital if it wants to oppose the whole of capital to itself. It must recognize itself as a particular of capital if it wants to present itself as its general antagonist."<sup>33</sup> Capital's need to integrate labor into its composition makes it uniquely vulnerable to working class resistance. Seen in this way, it is the constant specter of being unable to successfully subsume labor-power, and set it to work in the production of surplus value, that pushes capital forward.

This relational view of capital extends to the technical and organizational structure of the production process. These attributes of the labor process are not class neutral, but instead represent the material embodiments of particular strategic efforts made to undermine workers' power and resistance. Technological development — at least as it occurs under capitalism — cannot, therefore, be sufficiently explained either with reference to a transhistorical attribute of the human species (for example, rationality) or with respect to a simple environmental determinate (for example, material scarcity).<sup>34</sup> Instead, technical forms are fundamentally social and historical.<sup>35</sup> As Raniero Panzieri writes in his 1961 essay, *Surplus Value and Planning*, "the relations of production are within the productive forces."<sup>36</sup> This aspect of the autonomist thesis is consistent with Marx's intuition in chapter 15 of *Capital* where he observes, "It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt."<sup>37</sup> For Marx, investments in fixed capital are strategic in that they both reduce the number of workers employed and deskill the labor process, therefore changing the balance of class power in capital's favor.<sup>38</sup>

These comments help to clarify an important point: while, in the autonomist approach, political forms are shaped by the technical structure and organization of the labor process, this framework avoids any reductive variety of technological determinism. Where the latter would suggest a unidirectional model of form-determination in which a technical base determines a social form, this view tends to reverse the explanatory procedure. Effectivity accumulates unevenly on the side of labor and its political constitution, which have both ontological and explanatory priority in this account of capitalist development. Alterations in the technical composition of capital, then, are themselves explained on the basis of discreet instances of social antagonism.

With this theoretical perspective on economic development, a unique historical imaginary emerges. In the autonomist account, historical dynamics are punctuated by three terms:

“composition,” “decomposition,” and “recomposition.”<sup>39</sup> In the first moment, a distinct model of organization arises on the ground of a determinate technical composition of the labor process; this emergent form of political composition challenges the existing regime of production, unsettling capital’s means of valorization. In response to this challenge, capital restructures the labor process, upsetting the material terrain on which the given form of resistance was organized. This change in the technical composition “decomposes” the dominant forms of class organization, temporarily stabilizing accumulation and forcing labor into a process of “recomposition” in which it must re-imagine its tactics, demands, and organizational forms. The autonomists refer to this three-fold movement of composition, decomposition, and recomposition as a “cycle of struggle.”<sup>40</sup> In this, each new period emerges from a crisis in the previous one—from a struggle that fractures the old mode of organization and establishes the imperative for a new form of composition.<sup>41</sup>

With this categorial schema, capitalism is periodized by demarcating a series of discreet moments in the composition of the working class. History appears, then, as a diverse series of relatively stable instances in which certain attributes of the class—a certain technical and political composition—are sedimented and come to predominate within a given national or international milieu. In autonomist writing, these stable states tend to be described in terms of a number of subjective ideal types, or figures, each aiming to capture (albeit at a relatively high level of abstraction) the composition of the class in a given moment.<sup>42</sup> These figures bear titles like the “professional worker” (denoting the archetypal composition of the class in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century); the “mass worker” (the form of composition associated with industrial capital during the Fordist period); and the “social worker” (a figure of workers’ subjectivity—one most closely associated with Antonio Negri’s work in the early 1980s—emerging from a post-Fordist composition of labor). To this list we might add Hardt and Negri’s more recent category of the “multitude,” which, in part, represents a form of political composition emerging within a globalized productive order and rooted in the valorization of “immaterial” labor.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Class composition and the party form***

Having made this detour, one can see more clearly why Negri feels compelled to introduce the category of class composition into Lenin’s system. Class composition unites the emphasis on historical specificity implied by the concept of a “determinate social formation” with a focus on the “determinacy of the revolutionary subject and its temporal and spatial constitution.” It thus synthesizes the two key tenets of Lenin’s thought that were noted above. Negri even comes close to providing a formula for understanding this synthesis when he describes class composition as “determinate social formation with reference to class.”<sup>44</sup>

With these concepts in place, we can follow Negri in subjecting the Leninist political project to the kind of historical critique that, he suggests, Lenin’s own methodology implies. As Negri shows, Lenin’s theory of the party—both in its system of internal organization (*viz.* democratic centralism) and its relation to the class as a whole (*viz.* vanguardism)—is only adequate to a particular technical composition of labor. The relevance of the party form outside of its initial context cannot, therefore, be guaranteed (and, indeed, Negri claims in no uncertain terms that, even by the 1970’s, the composition of the class had changed remarkably). Thus he notes at the outset of his study, “The composition of the contemporary working class in struggle and the composition of the entire proletariat have nothing whatsoever to do with the composition of the proletariat of the early twentieth century.”<sup>45</sup>

In its structure, the Leninist party is understood as a paradigmatic organizational expression of the “professional worker”—i.e. of the composition of the class in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period, craft skills were still well preserved, with capital highly dependent on the technical knowledge of an elite sector of the industrial labor force. The typical demands of this era, which focused on the preservation of skilled work and the implementation of workers' self-management, reflect the particular position of craft workers within the production system. Many of the political formations that emerged in this period also (and not unproblematically) mirrored the hierarchies within the technical composition of the class. As Negri and others in the autonomist tradition have observed, Bolshevism reflected these divisions both in its internal structure and vanguard posture.<sup>46</sup>

The internal organization of the party, with its system of hierarchy and organic specialization, is thus understood to reflect the technical composition of the class within the early 20th century factory system. We might further observe how the detailed division of labor is mirrored in the social division of party functions, and how hierarchies between skilled and unskilled labor (as well as the bifurcation between conception and execution characteristic of the labor process, even in industries with a high percentage of skilled workers) are replicated in the division between central committee (and cadre) members on one hand and the rank-and-file membership on the other. In Lenin's organizational model, then, Negri finds a kind of isomorphism between the form of the factory and that of the party.<sup>47</sup>

Negri further suggests the vanguard position that the party assumes in relation to the proletariat as a whole must be understood to reflect the relative isolation of the industrial working class in pre-revolutionary Russia. The minority status of the advanced sections of the proletariat relative to the peasantry and those involved in small scale production placed a small number of industrial workers at the leading edge of Russia's highly uneven economic development, giving them the objective position of a vanguard in the social formation.<sup>48</sup>

In Negri's reading, Lenin converted this objective position into a political program adequate to the conditions at hand, a program that translated the economic isolation of the industrial working class into a leadership principle and source of strength. As he writes, "Lenin [...] starts from this awareness of determinate class composition and its isolation, confronts it, and reverses this isolation into being vanguard, into an ability to drive the entire movement."<sup>49</sup>

Further discussion of this context is useful. Although there were small pockets of large-scale industry, many other sectors of the Russian economy were, at most, merely formally subsumed under capitalist social relations. While perhaps inflected by wage and commodity forms, the intrinsic features of the labor process and class composition in these sectors remained effectively pre-capitalist. Trotsky's frank comments on the economy of prerevolutionary Russia paint a useful picture of this contradictory situation:

Russia's development is first of all notable for its backwardness. But historical backwardness does not mean a mere retracing of the course of the advanced countries a hundred or two hundred years later. Rather it gives rise to an utterly different 'combined' social formation, in which the most highly developed achievements of capitalist technique and structure are integrated into the social relations of feudal and pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and dominating them, fashioning a unique relationship of classes.<sup>50</sup>

It is this "unique relationship of classes" that underpins, at least in Negri's interpretation, the party's vanguardism. On this he too is worth quoting at length:

*On the one hand*, there is an ongoing process of industrialization and the formation of some class vanguards, which are splitting; *on the other hand*, there is the rest of the country, involved as it is in the difficult labor of exiting semifeudal or precapitalist modes of production, a working class limited but now able to assume and configure, in itself, and by virtue of its contradictory relation with the overall development of society, a concept of organization as a general interpretation of the needs of society as a whole. [...] In this determinate situation, the need for an overall recomposition of development and of the struggle against exploitation cannot be carried forward by a vanguard without an external project and leadership.<sup>51</sup>

Essential in Negri's interpretation of both the party's organizational form and vanguard status is Lenin's effort to appropriate the objective determinations of the class and turn them into mechanisms of subjective power. In each instance an isomorphic relation (a relation of formal similarity) exists between the technical and political composition of labor. It is this method—one based on developing a subversive homology between political and technical composition as they exist within a given social formation—that Negri ultimately affirms in Lenin's work and not any specific organizational model. As he argues at numerous points, the form of class composition that supported the Leninist conception of the party is no longer with us.

In many respects, the labor militancy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the aftershocks of the Russian Revolution itself, forced capital to undertake a thoroughgoing reorganization of production. These changes both broke the power of skilled workers through the managerial and technical reorganization of the labor process and pushed towards a tighter integration between the state and the market. Together they ensured the stability of accumulation and the value-form. Employing the autonomist terminology that Negri favors, these shifts opened the era of the 'mass worker.' In this new composition, Taylorist managerial techniques were combined with a Fordist technical and wage regime and Keynesian macroeconomic regulation. As Hardt and Negri would eventually describe it, this Taylor-Ford-Keynes nexus was "the trinity that would constitute the modern welfare state."<sup>52</sup>

Through these shifts, accumulation was preserved and development intensified—this represents an era, from the 1940's through the 1960's, of strong and sustained growth for many industrialized economies. What gradually emerged from this reorganization was an integration of disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms that the autonomists termed the "social factory"—a phrase first used in the 1960's to describe post-War Italian society. In this framework, the factory is still the central site in the extraction of surplus value, but comes increasingly to overcode a range of other social sites, which are structured according to its disciplinary rhythms. As Mario Tronti writes, providing the first formulation of the concept of the social factory, "at the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation is transformed into a moment of the relation of production, the whole of society is turned into an *articulation* of production, that is, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society."<sup>53</sup>

Through the mediation of what Negri dubbed the "planner state," the factory ceased to be an isolated productive entity.<sup>54</sup> Instead it becomes integrated with a multiplicity of other institutional spaces, including the home, the school, the urban environment, etc.—locales once understood to be relatively isolated in their roles of consumption and reproduction. This, one should note, is not to say the home or the school were ever truly disconnected from capital accumulation. Indeed, many feminist scholars and activists around the autonomist movement in the 1970's argued forcefully that the domestic sphere always

had a crucial role in the *production* of surplus value, and was never simply a space for consumption and reproduction.<sup>55</sup> Rather, the claim is that these spheres existed in relative isolation from the specific disciplinary and regulatory techniques of the factory, techniques that in the era of the mass worker were distributed across an increasingly wide social field. Through Fordist wage-productivity deals, supplemented by the application of social welfare programs and the mobilization of a mass advertising apparatus, consumption was also targeted and planned with the goal of maintaining effective demand and seamlessly integrating the whole circuit of industrial capital.

Negri and others in his milieu saw this integration of society into the circuits of capital as opening a host of new pathways for the direct subversion of capitalist accumulation.<sup>56</sup> This perspective provided a framework for understanding the militancy of the 1960's and 70's, which often went beyond shop-floor actions to encompass new social spaces and subjects. Against a more orthodox view in which these social movements were of secondary importance relative to factory-based politics, the autonomists tended to view these uprisings as themselves expressions of class struggle, capable of immediately attacking the planned circuits of accumulation within the social factory.

In Negri's interpretation, the emergence of this new social terrain undermined the basic distinction between the economic struggle and the political struggle, a distinction upon which much in Lenin's theory of the party was predicated. Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?*—his most programmatic account of the party structure—is, in large part, a critique of economism. In it he suggests that the working class, absent the mediation of the party, will only be capable of pursuing struggles that address immediate conditions in specific workplaces or sectors. They will neither generalize these struggles to arrive at a universal set of demands, nor pose a fundamental challenge to the state.<sup>57</sup> To transition from the immediate economic struggle to the wider political struggle, Lenin suggests, a party is needed.<sup>58</sup> On Negri's reading of the social factory thesis, and in his account of the "planner state," there is a flattening of the distinction between economic and political demands. Because the state is increasingly involved in both direct production and in organizing the terrain of circulation, demands—wherever they arise—take on a general character, fusing the economic and the political. With the state assuming the role of a collective capitalist, even seemingly narrow economic struggles loose their particularity by immediately posing a political challenge to the state and its policy framework. As Negri writes, "The shift from particularity to generality, from economic to political struggle [...], loses the meaning it had in Lenin's thought. [...] Today, in our situation, economic and political struggles are completely identical."<sup>59</sup> While Negri continued to suggest various reformulations of the party concept throughout the 1970's, his analysis of the conjuncture increasingly suggested that the Bolshevik model was definitively superseded.

Negri (often in collaboration with Michael Hardt) has subsequently analyzed further mutations in the nature of work and its organization. Many of these have been described—albeit not without controversy—under the rubrics of "immaterial" and "affective" labor, concepts that depict a composition of the class under a post-Fordist regime of accumulation. That is, they refer to a class composition rooted in a post-industrial context, where the factory no longer has the same centralizing function in society or culture.<sup>60</sup> Forms of technical automation partially facilitated these shifts away from the factory by raising the organic composition of capital in manufacturing and driving investment (in search of higher profit rates) towards the tertiary and quaternary sectors of the economy, where work often takes on an "immaterial" and highly social character.<sup>61</sup>

Negri has further argued that there have been important shifts in the form of the state and the nature of political sovereignty. As early as the mid-1970's he diagnosed the beginnings of a breakdown in the Keynesian "planner state." Negri in part traces this shift

through the changing function of money in the world system. Central in this account is the emergence of a post-Bretton Woods monetary system following Nixon's floating of the dollar and elimination of the direct international convertibility of dollars to gold. In Negri's reading, this monetary shift broke the mediating link between labor time (qua measure of value) and money as a universal equivalent (i.e. as a money commodity in which the labor-values of all other commodities could be validly expressed). This fundamentally challenged the existing regulatory structure, which often depended on the consistency of money as a measure of value and a mechanism for facilitating development.<sup>62</sup> The link between labor and value is further loosened by the growth of the tertiary sector, where, Negri contends, there is a breakdown in the ability to index direct labor time to value output.

Shifts in global monetary policy further facilitated a spatial diffusion of productive activity, leading to a globalized productive order which Hardt and Negri would, by the early 2000's, describe with their concept of "empire." In their account of this global formation, national sovereignty becomes weakened and in part displaced onto transnational financial institutions that take on, along with a growing NGO network, key governmental functions. In their view, then, strategic and organizational perspectives must shift away from the goal of gaining control over the state, and towards the formation of global counter-institutions that can adequately challenge capital within the imperial terrain on which it is operating. This leads to a further distancing from the Leninist perspective, which, in their reading, is irrevocably wedded to the project of seizing state power within a given national milieu.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Reading Dean on the party form***

I will conclude by briefly turning to Jodi Dean's recent work on Lenin and the party in order to highlight what may be a productive point of contrast. In her recent work, Dean has offered a thorough and rigorously synthesized account of the party form and has, at least within the US context, prompted a crucial debate on movement organization and strategy. In the final chapter of *The Communist Horizon*, Dean ends her analysis of the current political situation by suggesting that the Occupy movement organize itself as a party following a broadly Leninist model.<sup>64</sup> Beyond appealing to certain pragmatic gains that she feels could be won through a formalization of the movement's organizational structure, Dean has two arguments for the relevance of the party. The first – and the one she develops most fully in her latest book, *Crowds and Party* – is a transhistorical argument that grounds the necessity of the party in a broadly psychoanalytic account of subject formation. Here the party-class relation is essentially analogized to the therapeutic encounter between analyst and patient, and the transference dynamics found therein.<sup>65</sup> There is, however, a second (but somewhat less fully developed) historical argument for the party in which Dean suggests that the party is the model of political organization most appropriate to the contemporary form of capitalism, which she refers to as "communicative capitalism."

Dean's main argument in support of the party is a highly formal one. It depends, at least in certain key respects, on the transposition of a Lacanian account of subject formation into the sphere of group identification and the psychodynamics of crowds. Her suggestion, in essence, is that the party has a crucial recognitive function in the formation of "the people" qua political subject. That is, for the people to be constituted and recognize themselves in their actions, the party is needed. More precisely, on Dean's model, the party mediates a passage between "the crowd" and "the people." Here the former names a kind of unformed social mass, characterized by spontaneous egalitarian inclinations and a generalized desire for collectivity, while the latter describes a political subject that is reflexively grounded – in the sense of having an account of itself and its past actions – and

oriented towards the achievement of certain political goals.<sup>66</sup> As a subjectivating mechanism, the party's action is largely retroactive. In Dean's formulation, the spontaneous actions of the crowd remain politically ambivalent until the party declares, *ex post facto*, the action to have been an action of "the people" in pursuit of a given political end. Only at this point do "the people" emerge and recognize themselves. As Dean writes, "The people as subject is neither crowd nor party but between them, in the overlap of anticipation and retroactive determination with respect to the political process."<sup>67</sup> She continues: "Because the party looks for them, the people are found."<sup>68</sup>

As was noted, the subjectivation of "the people" by the party, and the mode of recognition it facilitates, is described largely through a psychoanalytic model of transference. Thus Dean argues, "Transference contributes to a theory of the party in this precise sense of a 'mode of access to what is hidden in the unconscious.' The party is a form that accesses the discharge that has ended, the crowd that has gone home, the people who are not there but exert a force nonetheless. It is thus a site of transferential relations."<sup>69</sup>

By way of comparison, we may simply note that the grounding of Dean's account in a de-contextualized picture of subject formation (here figured in psychoanalytic terms) places it at some distance from Negri's work and the historical considerations that orient it. Given this, it is unsurprising that in his most recent co-authored work with Michael Hardt, he has explicitly rejected this type of argument for, among other reason, being rooted in "dogmatic psychoanalytic assumptions about group formation, which we do not share."<sup>70</sup>

Given their divergent positions on the formal conditions of subject formation (as well as on the proper subject of the political), a more productive point of comparison may be found in Dean's historical arguments. Here too, however, we find opposed approaches to the party and its historical determination.

On the basis of Negri's framework, as sketched above, Dean's historical arguments will appear paradoxical. On one hand, Dean makes an empirical case for the emergence of a new regime of capital—one characterized by the increasing valorization of communicative and affective labor, the displacement of Fordist managerial models, and the blurring of work-life divisions—on the other hand, however, she appeals to a political form conceived under a markedly different set of social-productive conditions. At first glance, then, it seems that we are given a picture in which capital has an inner historicity but labor's forms of political composition do not.

While one might defend the adequacy of the Leninist model with reference to what has remained relatively constant in the organization of capital, this is not Dean's approach. Her argument takes a different logical form as she suggests that the party is needed precisely because of what differentiates it structurally from the dominant elements of contemporary production. Here we might note that her critique of Occupy is that it too closely parallels the organizational and cultural forms of communicative capitalism: "[Occupy] tends to be characterized by diversity, horizontality, individuality, inclusivity, and openness [...]. That these attributes also apply to the global networks of communicative capitalism, that they are celebrated by advertisers and invoked as best practices for efficient corporations, tends to be left unsaid."<sup>71</sup>

Against this formal continuity between communicative capitalism and those movements that have emerged in opposition to it, Dean proposes a political structure (the party) that represents an inversion of this regime of production.<sup>72</sup> The logic here is one of negation. Where communicative capitalism is, at least by her own description, diverse, horizontal, and inclusive, Dean offers a model of political leadership that is more tightly centralized and assumes a vanguardist posture. In her account, then, the party appears not only as the

organizational form that can best sustain a truly collective mode of subject formation, but it is also the only one that can break with existing models of capitalist organization.

This point bears on Dean's critique of Hardt and Negri's work. In her view, their concept of the "multitude," with its internal diversity, a-centric structure, and commitment to political immediacy, fails to register as a sufficiently *antagonistic* subject vis-à-vis global capital. The multitude, on her reading, is not only too diffuse in its political constitution, but also too inclusive, "the concept includes too much—everyone in fact and the cost of this inclusion is antagonism. Rather than labor against capital, haves against have-nots, the 99 percent against the 1 percent, we have a multitude of singularities combining and recombining in mobile, fluid, communicative, and affective networks."<sup>23</sup>

Dean similarly takes issue with a perceived spontaneism in Hardt and Negri's account. This, she contends, follows from their tendency to view resistance as an organic outgrowth of capital's development, emerging in an unmediated fashion from within the sinews of capitalism (and the class relation) itself.<sup>24</sup> Dovetailing her aforementioned claim about antagonism, then, Dean argues that in relying on the spontaneous emergence of a counter-subject to capital (*viz.* the multitude), Hardt and Negri tend to downplay the ruptural quality of a properly anti-capitalist and anti-systemic politics. Dean's embrace of the party form, therefore, is rooted in a perspective that suggests a sufficiently antagonistic mode of political subjectivation requires an organizational apparatus that intervenes from a position of exteriority with respect to capital. Anything short of this will be too contaminated by the political and economic structures of the present, and thus unable to break sufficiently from it.

These points shed further light on Dean's turn to the party as the preferred organizational vehicle for contemporary social struggle. The historical specificity of the party form registers in Dean's account, but in an unintuitive way: she implicitly acknowledges the historical particularity of the party in so far as she affirms its asynchronicity with respect to the current conjuncture. In a loose sense, it is this asynchronous—or even anachronistic—character of the Leninist organizational schema that makes it relevant. In her argument, the party is a desirable social form because it breaks with the organizational contours of the present, and thus can constitute itself as an antagonistic and collective force. If Negri's reading of Lenin is correct, however, the party has this character because it mirrors a set of conditions that have been historically superseded in the long passage from early industrial capitalism to what Dean calls "communicative capitalism".

On Negri's account, Leninism (or more precisely, the shockwaves set off by the October Revolution and the international adoption of the Bolshevik model) itself prompted capital to modify the technical composition of labor that gave adequacy to the party form. For him, Lenin's success makes Leninism impossible to repeat. This is something Negri notes throughout his study. Thus Dean's endorsement of the party in the absence of the historical conditions that gave rise to and nurtured it appears to be an inversion of the Leninist method.

Perhaps more significantly, it is not clear that the current context can support a return to a past model. The political and institutional cultures that grounded the party's organizational routines have been largely eroded. In this regard it is worth noting that while recent movements have encountered significant limitations on their ability to endure and generalize their demands, attempts to straightforwardly repeat the Leninist project have also been largely unsuccessful. In spite of efforts by many talented and committed party organizers, Bolshevik style party formations have found relatively little uptake among either workers or movement activists over the past decades. Absent a rich and organic connection to the movement, and ultimately to the working class, these party

formations have often drifted towards sectarianism and bureaucratic deformation. Their small scale and isolation have also created structural limitations on their ability to formulate adequate strategic perspectives, and thus to provide effective leadership. The reason for these failures, however, is not a lack of effort from party organizers, or a simple absence of subjective will, but the structural inadequacy of the Leninist model vis-à-vis the composition of the class.<sup>75</sup>

My reading of Dean has attempted to reveal a tension in her work. Her solution to the problem of organization has a Leninist content, but does not derive it on the basis of a Leninist method. It turns to the party, but does so in a way that is, if not ahistorical, at least inverts the relations of historical determination that, Negri argues, informed how the party's leadership function and organizational structure were conceived. Rather than proceeding by a simple negation, we find in Lenin a kind of isomorphism between the organizational form of the party and the contours of capitalist production within a particular historical period.

Viewed in this way, Negri's approach to organization is one that points to the historical potentialities opened by new organizational forms, rather than proceeding by way of a simple inversion of hegemonic structures. It is clear, then, that Negri's analysis precludes any straightforward reproduction of the Leninist party. As we have seen, the party's victories modified the ground on which it thrived. For Negri, therefore, the Leninist method forbids the repetition of the Leninist model.

---

## Notes

1. By way of example, we can observe the exchanges on the party form that are featured in the Fall 2013 issue of *Theory and Event* and the Fall 2014 issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*—both guest edited by Jodi Dean. As well as Dean's recent works, *The Communist Horizon* and *Crowds and Party*. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012); Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party* (New York: Verso, 2016). 
2. Antonio Negri, *Factory of Strategy: Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin*, trans. Arianna Bove (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). 
3. Costas Douzinas and Slovoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010). Bruno Bosteels, "The Actuality of Communism" (London: Verso, 2014). Dean, *The Communist Horizon*. Dean, *Crowds and Party*. 
4. Gavin Walker, "The Body of Politics," *Theory and Event* 16, no. 4 (2013). 
5. Gavin Walker, "The Body of Politics." 
6. Jason Smith, "Contemporary Struggles and the Question of the Party: A Reply to Gavin Walker," *Theory and Event* 16, no. 4 (2013). 
7. Jason Smith, "Contemporary Struggles and the Question of the Party." 
8. On the idea of an ahistorical kernel of the political, See Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism?" in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 111; Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 509. See also the discussion in Bruno Bosteels, "The Actuality of Communism," 270. 
9. Jason Smith, "The Politics of the Street: Commune and Party in the Age of Riots", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 4 (2014): 699. 
10. Joshua Clover and Aaron Benanav, "Can Dialectics Break BRICS?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 4 (2014); Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, "The Materiality of

11. Clover and Benanav, "Can Dialectics Break BRICS?," 754. 
12. Clover and Benanav, "Can Dialectics Break BRICS?," 745. Clover and Benanav further emphasize that the party form is wedded to a project of managing economic development through the state-mediated empowerment of the industrial working class. They argue, however, that such a project is now anachronistic. Echoing Marx's arguments in the *Grundrisse*, they suggest that the developmental dynamics of capital have made direct proletarian labor increasingly superfluous from the perspective of producing material wealth, even if the enduring character of the value-form continues, in a contradictory dynamic, to posit direct labor-time as the sole measure of that wealth. In light of this, they suggest that the only viable anti-capitalist project entails the abolition of proletarian labor, and of the role of labor in mediating the distribution of use-values. Clover and Benanav, "Can Dialectics Break BRICS?," 747. 
13. Mezzadra and Neilson, "The Materiality of Communism," 787. 
14. Peter D. Thomas, "The Communist Hypothesis and the Question of Organization," *Theory and Event* 16, no. 4 (2013). For a wider overview of the debate on the party among the Italian New Left, see Steve Wright, "A Party of Autonomy?," in Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha, ed., *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2005); Michael Hardt, "Into the Factory: Negri's Lenin and the Subjective Ceasura (1968-73)," in Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha, ed., *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in Practice* (London: Pluto Press, 2005). 
15. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 5. 
16. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 13. 
17. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 17. 
18. As Marta Harnecker writes, "To designate this historically determined social reality, we use the concept of social formation. This concept refers, as we have seen, to a concrete, complex, impure reality, like all reality; to distinguish it from the concept of mode of production which refers to an abstract, pure, 'idea' object." Marta Harnecker, "Social Formation, Mode of Production, Political Conjuncture," N.d., <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/theoretical-review/tr-17-3.pdf>. 
19. As Lenin writes in "What the 'Friends of the People' Are and How They Fight the Social Democrats": "[the concept of the social formation] made it possible to proceed from the description of social phenomena (and their evaluation from the standpoint of an ideal) to their strictly scientific analysis, which isolates, let us say by way of example, that which distinguishes one capitalist country from another and investigates that which is common to all of them... This hypothesis for the first time made a scientific sociology possible..." Lenin quoted in Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 16. 
20. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 19. 
21. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 45. 
22. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 9. 
23. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 10. 
24. Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Edinburgh; Leeds: AK Press, 2000), 67. 
25. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 34. 

26. As Negri notes, “the concept of class composition is formed on parameters that refer both to the productive process and to the political experience of the class.” Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 142. [D](#)

27. Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*(London; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2002), 3. [D](#)

28. Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*(University of Illinois Press, 1999), 66; Wright, *Storming Heaven*,78. [D](#)

29. Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 67. [D](#)

30. Borrowing a trope usually invoked to describe Kant’s radical overturning of existing views on epistemology, Yann Moulier describes this as the autonomists’ “Copernican inversion of Marxism.” Yann Moulier, “Introduction,” in *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, by Antonio Negri, (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 19. [D](#)

31. Mario Tronti, “Lenin In England,” 1964,  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm>. [D](#)

32. Mario Tronti, “Social Capital,” *Telos*1973, no. 17 (September 21, 1973): 98–121. [D](#)

33. Mario Tronti, “Factory and Society,” 1962,  
<https://operaismoinenglish.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/factory-and-society/>. [D](#)

34. Those offering a transhistorical account of technical development often do so by documenting an intersection of the two aforementioned variables (see, for example, G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, Expanded edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 135.) In Cohen’s work, the technical development of productive forces is given unambiguous explanatory priority over other factors in social and economic life. Driven by a set of anthropological invariants, it is claimed that technologies develop more or less *independently* of other aspects of social life, aspects that become, at least in this account, so many *dependent*variables with respect to the latter. As Raniero Panzieri writes, critiquing formulations of this kind from an autonomist perspective, “new characteristic features assumed by capitalist organization are thus mistaken for stages of development of an objective ‘rationality.’” Raniero Panzieri, “The Capitalist Use of Machinery,” 1961, <http://libcom.org/library/capalist-use-machinery-raniero-panzieri>. [D](#)

35. When Gilles Deleuze insists that “machines are social before being technical” he captures a similar idea. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand, 1st edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 34. [D](#)

36. Raniero Panzieri, “Surplus Value and Planning: Notes on the Reading of Capital,” 1961, <http://libcom.org/library/surplus-value-planning-raniero-panzieri>. [D](#)

37. Karl Marx, *Capital*V.I (New York: Penguin Books, 1976): 563. [D](#)

38. We might note that, for Marx, market-mediated competition provides an additional imperative for technological development under capitalism. The autonomists, however, have relatively little to say about this. [D](#)

39. Guido Baldi, “Theses on Mass Worker and Social Capital,” *Radical American*6, no. 1 (1972): 3–21; Harry Cleaver, “The Inversion of Class Perspective,” in *Open Marxism Vol II: Theory and Practice.*, ed. Werner Bonefeld, Richard Gunn, and Kosmas Psychopoulos (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 113-114. [D](#)

40. A note of warning is in order. As Sergio Bologna—one of the innovators of this line of theorizing—cautioned, the cycle of struggle concept can function like a “picklock that

opens all doors,” being all too easily reduced to an intellectual schema under which complex historical dynamics are neatly subsumed (Bologna quoted in Wright, *Storming Heaven*, 5). Salar Mohandesi further cautions that history does not start over with each cycle of struggle: “historical conjunctures [...] do not wash away everything that preceded them, but instead seem to build upon the past in peculiar ways. The decomposition of a certain kind of class figure is not synonymous with its absolute disintegration.” Salar Mohandesi, “Class Consciousness or Class Composition ?,” *Science & Society* 77, no. 1 (January 2013): 93. [D](#)

41. In documenting this historical sequence, it is typically assumed that, in a given period, a single modality of production is ‘hegemonic’—that it can assert a kind of formal dominance across a wide social space. For example, in their recent work, Hardt and Negri claim “immaterial” production has become hegemonic, imposing its organizational features, cultural attributes, and temporality upon all productive activity (even shifting how forms of industrial and agricultural production are carried out). They caution, however, that hegemony in the technical composition need not necessarily imply leadership in a cycle of political composition. [D](#)
42. Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*(Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 78; Nick Witheford, “Autonomist Marxism and the Information Society,” *Capital & Class*18, no. 1 (March 1, 1994): 91-92. [D](#)
43. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*(New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*(Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). [D](#)
44. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 47. [D](#)
45. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 10. [D](#)
46. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*; Baldi, “Theses on Mass Worker and Social Capital.” As Sergio Bologna has observed, in other national contexts during this period, council communism emerged and reflected in its emphasis on self-management, “the presence of a labor force inextricably linked to the technology of the working process, with high professional values and a natural inclination to stress their function as producers.”Sergio Bologna, “Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin of the Workers-Council Movement,” *Telos*1972, no. 13 (October 1, 1972): 6. [D](#)
47. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 36. [D](#)
48. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 38. [D](#)
49. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 11. [D](#)
50. Leon Trotsky, *Stalin*,(New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1941), 422. [D](#)
51. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 41-42. [D](#)
52. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). [D](#)
53. Tronti, “Factory and Society.” [D](#)
54. Tronti too suggested that during this period the state was increasingly functioning as a “collective capitalist.” As he writes: “the machinery of the political State tends to ever more identify with the figure of the *collective capitalist*; it is turned ever more into the property of the capitalist mode of production and, as a result, *a function of the capitalist*” Tronti, “Factory and Society”, <https://operaismoinenglish.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/factory-and-society/>. [D](#)
55. See, for example, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and The Subversion of the Community*(Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972). Leopoldina

Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework Prostitution Labor and Capital*(New York: Autonomedia, 1995). 

56. Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 71. 
57. As Lenin writes, "The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade-union consciousness [...]." V.I. Lenin, *What is To Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement*, (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 31. 
58. Lenin's emphasis on a formal party of 'professional revolutionaries' has been widely critiqued for its elitism. Lars T. Lih's recent work contextualizing *What is to Be Done?* has, however, problematized this traditional critique of Lenin. Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to Be Done? In Context*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008). 
59. Negri, *Factory of Strategy*, 43-44. 
60. In 2016 over 80% of U.S. jobs were in the service sector (by contrast, 12.6% were in goods-producing areas, including mining, construction, and manufacturing, while 1.5% were in agriculture). These accounted for 79% of U.S. private sector GDP (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Industry Output and Employment Projections to 2018: Table 2.1. Employment by Major Industry Sector," Monthly Labor Review, November 2009. Available at: [http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_table\\_201.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_201.htm)). By way of comparison, manufacturing alone accounted for over 32% of U.S. employment at its peak in 1953. The service sector accounts for over 51% of global employment and 65% of global GDP (International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database. Available at: [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.srv.empl.zs?year\\_high\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.srv.empl.zs?year_high_desc=false); World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.SRV.TOTL.ZS>). 
61. For a survey of how these shifts impacted trade-union politics, see Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1997). Despite the relative growth of the service sector, Moody has cautioned against discounting the political significance of the industrial working class. 
62. Antonio Negri, "Crisis of the Planner State: Communism and Revolutionary Organization," in *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970's Italy*, ed. Timothy S. Murphy (London: Verso, 2005), 5. 
63. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*. 
64. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*. 
65. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 184. 
66. Dean understands "the people" as "the rest of us"—the part of the population that is constitutively excluded from the dominant order. It is neither a sociological aggregate nor an organic whole. Unlike the people qua "populist totality," the people, on Dean's account, lack any essential unity. Dean, *Crowds and Party*. 
67. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 157. 
68. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 158. 
69. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 184. 
70. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*(New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 44. 
71. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 208. An autonomist rejoinder may proceed by pointing out that the modifications in capital's organizational composition that Dean describes under the rubric of communicative capitalism can themselves be read as a

recuperation of the anti-systemic social movements of the 1960's and 70's. Capital, on this reading, sought to integrate the forms of life and productive practices that characterized the new left (a refusal of factory labor, a valorization of mobility, of intellectual and affective capacities and social cooperation) into a regime of profit. Writing on this period, Hardt and Negri note, "Capital did not need to invent a new paradigm (even if it were capable of doing so) because *the truly creative moment had already taken place*. Capital's problem was rather to dominate a new composition that had already been produced autonomously [...]." Thus, rather than view the emphasis on, for example, participatory decision making as an alien imposition and simple marker of capitalist command, it may instead be viewed as a genuine expressions of popular power and resistance, one that is merely distorted by its subsumption under capitalist social forms. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 276. [D](#)

72. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 16. [D](#)

73. Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, 78. [D](#)

74. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, 23. [D](#)

75. Put more simply, it is not clear that we could rebuild the Leninist party, even if such a rebuilding were desirable. To insist on this organizational possibility apart from the economic, political, and cultural terrain on which the party thrived is to risk voluntaristic excess. This is something Negri notes in his work from the 1970's. See Antonio Negri, "Workers Party Against Work," in Timothy S. Murphy, ed., *Books For Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*(London: Verso, 2005), 56.

[D](#)

 [Bio](#)

**Douglas Spielman**

Douglas Spielman is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. His past work has looked at representations of time in Marx's theory of value. Douglas's current research analyzes the ways in which labor was mobilized as a category of political recognition and right in early modern and modern social thought. He is, in part, concerned with how these usages of the category were impacted by technoscientific developments and discourses.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Lindsay Weinberg, "The Rationalization of Leisure: Marxist Feminism and the Fantasy of Machine Subordination," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.3>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## The Rationalization of Leisure: Marxist Feminism and the Fantasy of Machine Subordination

**Lindsay Weinberg**

**ABSTRACT** Critical analyses of domestic technological culture have emphasized the impact of domestic technologies on intensifying women's labor and reinforcing its privatization within the home, all the while being marketed as laborsaving devices. Drawing from the ways the marketing of domestic technologies framed the home as a space in need of technological administration, this article offers a Marxist feminist analysis of online surveillance during leisure time, examining how the marketing of technologies for both domestic labor and online leisure helps produce relationships between subjects and technologies that double as vehicles for capital accumulation. The article argues that we should look to the history of domestic technological design to understand the ways online surveillance and data collection are used to produce revenue and impact consumer behavior, given that both domestic technologies and contemporary information technologies work to rationalize non-waged time. The article begins with the Taylorization of the home popularized in 1912, followed by the rise of domestic technologies in the 1950s, in order to demonstrate how the ideological framing of the home as a space in need of rationalization informs the marketing of today's personalization technologies. The marketing of personalization technologies reproduces the racialized and gendered logic of machine subordination that framed domestic technologies for the home in the 20th century. The article concludes with a discussion of how Marxist feminism is a useful theoretical framework for understanding and developing a political response to online data collection, given that both the domestic sphere and online leisure time are traditionally understood to be outside the workday, and therefore supposedly outside the scope of capitalist workplace relations of surveillance and exploitation.

Cultural Studies and Media Studies scholarship have given Marxism a great deal of attention as a way of thinking through the impact of new media industries on both recognized and unrecognized work. Yet Marxist feminism, outside the work of Kylie Jarrett, has not figured prominently as a theoretical lens by which we can understand the exploitation of data in the digital economy. As Nick Srnicek explains, given the decline of manufacturing profitability, capitalism has given an increasingly central role to extracting and controlling data for a range of purposes, including the refinement of algorithms, the coordination and outsourcing of workers, the increased flexibility of production, and the management of markets.<sup>1</sup> This article joins Jarrett in the project of "bringing feminist theorization and activism about . . . unpaid reproductive work out of the domestic sphere, applying its insights to contemporary digital media."<sup>2</sup> However, it offers a different theory of the relationship between consumption online and capitalist exploitation—one which centers the role of digital technology in extracting profit from unwaged time, while resisting the conceptualization of online consumption and leisure-time as unremunerated labor.

Drawing from the ways the marketing of domestic technologies framed the home as a space in need of technological administration, this article offers a Marxist feminist analysis of online surveillance during leisure time, examining how the marketing of technologies for both domestic labor and online leisure helps produce relationships between subjects and technologies that double as vehicles for capital accumulation. Critical analyses of domestic technological culture have emphasized the impact of

domestic technologies on intensifying women's labor and reinforcing its privatization within the home, all the while being marketed as laborsaving devices.<sup>3</sup> The rise of domestic technologies for the home coincided with discourses advocating for the home's scientific management, which is contingent upon the monitoring and rational management of domestic life.

Building from Marxist feminism's analysis of exploitation outside the wage-relation and drawing from the ways unwaged domestic labor became subjected to technological rationalization, I argue that commercial forms of surveillance, and in particular, personalization technologies—technologies that accumulate information about consumer behaviors, buying habits, and demographic data to market goods and services to targeted audiences—should be situated as part of the genealogy of the rationalization of leisure time. By the rationalization of leisure time, I mean the application of workplace discipline and surveillance to time and space outside of the wage-relation. Contemporary personalization technologies are enmeshed in a larger web of cultural practices that make online leisure time profitable by monitoring, rationalizing, and commodifying user behavior. These technologies are indebted to the migration of workplace philosophies concerning time management and discipline to the home. We should look to the history of domestic technological design to understand the ways online surveillance and data collection are used to produce revenue and impact consumer behavior, given that both domestic technologies and contemporary personalization technologies work to rationalize non-waged time.

Tracing a genealogy of the rationalization of leisure illustrates the linkages between the ideological framing of the home as a space in need of technological administration, and of leisure time as requiring personalization technologies. In both cases, there is a discursive logic of time-management and efficiency, as well as fantasies of machine subordination, which structure the marketing of these technologies. My aim is to track the conditions of possibility that marketing for technology produces for the rationalization of time outside the wage relation, and not to assert a direct causal relationship between domestic technologies, on the one hand, and personalization technologies, on the other. I begin with the Taylorization of the home popularized in 1912—the application of Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of scientific management within the home economics movement, which transported the traditional work ethic into the domestic sphere—followed by the rise of domestic technologies in the 1950s. There is a strong parallel between marketing discourse's ideological framing of domestic technologies in the 1950s and 1960s as "electric servants" and contemporary anthropomorphized software agents and "digital butlers." Marketing discourse promoted the management of domestic life as a "service" provided by a subordinate machine-other, oftentimes racialized and gendered female, concealing the intensification of domestic labor—the increased amount of time spent cleaning and the rising expectations of cleanliness that resulted from the introduction of domestic technologies.

Personalization technologies are a continuation of this rationalization of the home in ways that produce profit for capitalism. While domestic technologies for the home helped to intensify domestic work and created demand for new household products and technologies, personalization technologies exploit user data through continuous online surveillance in order to target goods, ads, and services to users most likely to provide a return on capitalist investment. Personalization technologies are also predicated on a discourse where mastery over technology is associated with individual freedom and empowerment, and thus the marketing of these technologies reproduces the racialized and gendered logic of machine subordination that framed domestic technologies for the home. This logic helps to further obfuscate the ways these technologies render time

profitable for capitalism, given the emphasis placed on subjugating, as opposed to being subjugated by, technology.

The article concludes with a discussion of how Marxist feminism is a useful theoretical framework for developing a political response to online data collection, given that both the domestic sphere and online leisure time are traditionally understood to be outside the workday, and therefore supposedly outside the scope of capitalist surveillance and exploitation. Marxist feminism provides a critique of the domestic space as a site of labor predicated on the subordination of women and perpetuated through the mystification of housework as a “natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity,” an “act of love” that is inherently feminine, and thus non-work.<sup>4</sup> This framework helps critical scholars of media technology to understand how the aggregation of data produced during subjects’ online leisure time can also be understood as a site of capitalist oppression, mystified through the racialized and gendered fantasy of machine subordination that shaped the integration of information technology into the home.

## The Rationalization of Leisure Time

According to Kathi Weeks, the scientific management of the home in the early twentieth century signaled the importation of the traditional work ethic into the domestic sphere.<sup>5</sup> Christine Frederick helped pioneer the standardization of the kitchen space and popularized the Taylorization of the middle class home through her articles in *Ladies' Home Journal*, which later became the foundation for her book, *The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies In Home Management*.<sup>6</sup> Whereas for Marxist feminists in the 1970s, the identification of the home as a site of work was a way of challenging the subordination of women to men, their exclusion from the working class, and the exploitation of reproductive labor,<sup>7</sup> Frederick's identification of the domestic space as a site of work was fully compatible with capitalist principles of efficiency, productivity, and commodification. This compatibility is typified by an advertisement for the Hotpoint All-Electric Kitchen (1960). The ad celebrates Hotpoint as the “First to Introduce A Complete, Smartly Styled, Custom-Matched, All-Electric Kitchen With Scientifically-Planned Work-Saving Centers!”<sup>8</sup> In theory, the Hotpoint helps women save time through the carefully planned layout of the kitchen, rendering domestic labor more efficient.

For Frederick, the problem with domestic work was that women were finding themselves “overcome, actually assuming the mental attitude, in regard to their work, of *slave to master*, instead of master to slave . . . the nutshell of the whole matter is *that women master their work, instead of letting their work master them*” (emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup> Frederick argued that women needed to begin viewing the home as a space for efficiency, management, and organization in order to not be subjugated by their work. Frederick pathologizes women who do not regard homemaking as a scientific enterprise, noting that some women are consumed by “a mania for some one phase of housework—such as cleanliness, decoration, cooking, etc., on which all originality and effort is spent, to the neglect of general efficiency.”<sup>10</sup> The master-slave relationship is ever-present in the discourse surrounding domestic technologies and the rational administration of the home, where mastery over a task or object helps perpetuate a sense of individual freedom from the constraints of labor and elevate one’s status, even as the domestic space is increasingly subjected to workplace discipline. The conceptualization of domesticity as labor thus did not emancipate women from the fetters of capitalism through demystification but instead perpetuated women’s subordination and isolation in the domestic sphere. Women were expected to uphold even higher standards of cleanliness through the “assistance” of scientific management that would supposedly help women complete their domestic tasks.

The marketing of domestic technologies, and visions of their future applications, reinforced the idea that these technologies were servants for the consumer's use. In 1957, O. O. Binder published the article, "You'll Own 'Slaves' by 1965."<sup>11</sup> Directly targeting the readership of *Mechanix Illustrated*, the male hobbyist, he wrote the following:

In 1863, Abe Lincoln freed the slaves. But by 1965, slavery will be back! We'll all have personal slaves again, only this time we won't fight a Civil War over them. Slavery will be here to stay. Don't be alarmed. We mean robot "slaves." Let's take a peek into the future to see what the Robot Age will bring.<sup>12</sup>

The expression "we'll all have personal slaves again" signals that Binder was speaking to white males, in particular, as participants in the fantasy of renewed slave ownership. Binder described a variety of robot slaves ready at the push of a button to serve their master. These domestic robots were imagined as capable of cleaning, helping one to dress, helping in the workplace as hyper-efficient secretaries and at home as home security devices. Binder concluded that, "the wonders of electronics will dominate every phase of our future life to make it more successful and pleasurable for everyone who lives on Earth."<sup>13</sup> And yet, technologies for the home intensified the expectations of domestic work for women, manufactured a need for additional commodities, reproduced the association of womanhood with domesticity, and refigured the domestic sphere as a space in need of technological administration.<sup>14</sup> In both Binder's utopian future and 1950s and 1960s advertisements concerning domestic technologies, the ability to subjugate another—in this case, a technological apparatus—was a means of codifying one's own status and reinforced the fantasy of minimizing work, despite its actual intensification in the push to rationalize the home.<sup>15</sup>

Advertisements for domestic technologies sought to distinguish housework from manual labor so that women would not feel devalued and defeminized by domestic work. As Adrian Forty explains, the illusion that domestic technologies were symbolic and material stand-ins for servants was an illusion that "helped quell any uneasiness that people might have felt about their status in society."<sup>16</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, domestic servants were predominantly immigrants and women of color.<sup>17</sup> Many households could no longer afford domestic workers after the Great Depression, and so technology was positioned as a replacement for these services. Domestic technologies such as vacuum cleaners received feminized names like "Daisy" and "Betty Anne" to underscore both their servant status as human substitutes and the feminized nature of domestic work.<sup>18</sup> As domestic technologies became increasingly popular with middle-class women in the 1950s, the design was modified to look less industrial and machine-like, and more elegant and discreet.<sup>19</sup> Advertisements predominantly featured white well-dressed women in high heels, empowered by expressing mastery over technologies that were marketed as "doing the work" on the woman's behalf.<sup>20</sup>

These gendered and racialized cultural understandings of domestic technologies are also present in the marketing of the first computational devices for rationalizing the home. The Honeywell Kitchen Computer, offered in a 1969 Neiman Marcus Catalog, was a low-powered computer designed for storing recipes. Neiman Marcus marketed the computer as a device that, for \$10,600, could advise recipe selections based on the list of ingredients provided to the device. Although the Kitchen Computer was a marketing ploy and never meant to be sold, this piece of vaporware, according to Paul Atkinson, "shows that, real or not, non-products speak volumes about the perception, reception and consumption of, and our relationship to, technology, at culturally specific points in time."<sup>21</sup> The Kitchen Computer helped to conceptualize the domestic sphere as a space in need of

technological assistance, where technology can help a woman plan her family's meals more effectively with a modernized kitchen.

The symbolic work that the Kitchen Computer does to reimagine the home as a space in need of computational administration is perhaps best captured in the original advertisement for the product. The ad features a well-manicured white woman leisurely resting her hand on the extremely large device with a streamlined design, helping to assimilate an object that would otherwise seem strikingly out of place in the wood-paneled kitchen.<sup>22</sup> The caption reads, "If she can only cook as well as Honeywell can compute," a tagline that seeks to present the computer as rivaling the woman in skill and ingenuity. As Atkinson explains, the Kitchen Computer

reinforced the popular cultural representations of the domestic kitchen as the focus of family interactions with technology in the home, in a variety of forms. In addition, it inspired those working at the forefront of computer developments to realize that, despite the limitations of technology at the time, there was real value in seriously considering a domestic market for computer products.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the marketing of the Kitchen Computer precipitated the integration of computers into the domestic space, figuring the domestic sphere as "a territory ripe for computational colonization."<sup>24</sup>

Home computing advertising would go on to transition from promoting the computer as primarily a hobbyist activity up until the mid-1980s to a "novel kind of 'information appliance'" for the home by the 1990s, helping to allay concerns about rapid technological transformation in American society.<sup>25</sup> Much like the technologies designed for rationalizing domestic labor, the home computer was advertised as laborsaving and easy to use.<sup>26</sup> This assimilation of computing into the home hinged on the symbolic work that ownership over the machine does to make its purchase meaningful for the consumer. As Elaine Lally explains, "It is through such symbolic action—establishing symbolically the right to claim a good as one's own—that the consumer is able to appropriate to her- or himself the meaning which the advertisers and manufacturers have inscribed within the commodity."<sup>27</sup>

Much like the marketing of domestic technologies for the home, computers also have a legacy of being marketed as feminized and subservient objects to the extent that they are associated with providing services. One of the first desktop computers with a Graphic User Interface was Apple Lisa (1983), bearing a feminized moniker like the domestic technologies discussed earlier. In the promotional video for Apple Lisa, a well-dressed executive says to the camera, "What's so special about Lisa? Oh I've had other computers. But my Lisa's different."<sup>28</sup> This advertisement uses the clichéd language of heterosexual romantic entanglements to characterize the "special" relationship between the male executive and his technology. The gendering of the Apple computer, and the idea that the user can make the "power of Lisa" work for them, prevents the male executive from being feminized when engaged in the otherwise feminized labor of clerical work such as typing. His ability to subordinate the machine is marketed as a form of empowerment, which harkens back to the gendered and racialized logics of machine subordination that integrated domestic technologies into the home, albeit for women's use.

The development of computer personalization further entrenched the idea that the personal computer (PC) is a means of asserting one's individuality by engaging with machines designed to "serve" the user. As Fred Turner notes, "computers have seen the development of a 'dynamic of personalization' since the 1940s, in which both computers

and computer users have become progressively more individualized.”<sup>29</sup> Early visions of computer personalization included highly anthropomorphized software agents and digital butlers. Much like the domestic technologies that rationalized unwaged time and were represented as subordinate machine-others, the digital butler produced a fantasy of machine servitude. Nicholas Negroponte, a pioneer of human-machine interaction design, urged the development of agents that would “learn and develop over time, like human friends and assistants. It is not only the acquisition of a model of you; it is using it in context.”<sup>30</sup> Negroponte argued for the necessity of designing interfaces that could help sort through information and assist with the administration of the owner’s time:

The best metaphor I can conceive of for a human-computer interface is that of a well-trained English butler. The “agent” answers the phone, recognizes the callers, disturbs you when appropriate, and may even tell a white lie on your behalf. The same agent is well trained in timing, versed in finding the opportune moments, and respectful of idiosyncrasies. People who know the butler enjoy considerable advantage over a total stranger. That is just fine.<sup>31</sup>

Negroponte envisioned software butlers that knew enough about their owner that they could be modeled on their behavior, preferences, desires, and idiosyncrasies. This vision of software butlers resonates with the design of Ask Jeeves (1996), a digital search assistant that positioned the user as an employer of a virtual domestic servant;<sup>32</sup> Siri (2010), Apple’s virtual assistant; Ms. Dewey (2006-2009), a Microsoft search engine; and Rover (1995), a cartoon dog that provided guidance and search assistance for Windows users. Rover’s design is informed by what Sianne Ngai might call an aesthetic of cuteness: its exaggerated passivity caters to consumer desires for “mastery and control as much as his or her desire to cuddle.”<sup>33</sup> In the case of Ms. Dewey, this virtual agent was not only explicitly feminized but also racialized, performing, in the words of Miriam E. Sweeney, “stereotypical urban Blackness in response to racially coded search terms.”<sup>34</sup>

The fantasy of machine subordination thus plays a pivotal role in structuring how users understand the purposes of digital assistants. According to Hal Varian, Google’s chief economist, the *Google Now* digital assistant is desirable because it provides a “Personal Assistant” for less wealthy consumers.<sup>35</sup> For users who lack positions of power in the workplace (which might otherwise provide human personal assistants), digital assistants offer the experience of having one’s needs and desires anticipated and efficiently managed. Similarly, the marketing of domestic technologies helped to ameliorate the class- and gender-based anxieties that middle class women might otherwise have experienced in carrying out their own domestic labor. Even if these women could no longer afford human domestic servants, they could now express mastery over domestic technologies.

In the case of Siri, a voice-controlled personal assistant that promises to serve as a “faster, easier way to do all kinds of useful things,” technological empowerment and efficiency are tied to the enduring logic of feminized technological subservience.<sup>36</sup> Siri is presented as a personal assistant with a female voice, often referred to as a “she” as opposed to an “it” online, who will make the user’s time more effectively spent. The anthropomorphism of Siri encourages users to form emotional attachments, and there are numerous documented instances of the device’s sexualization. Siri is also designed to actively participate in reinforcing its own anthropomorphism. For instance, Siri is programmed to respond to particular user questions with what has been described as “sass,” an attitude that reflects humor, wit, and sarcasm but does not ultimately destabilize Siri’s subservience to the user.<sup>37</sup>

For instance, in one example of a user's interaction with Siri, a user asked what the movie *Inception* is about, and Siri responded, "Inception is about dreaming about dreaming about dreaming about something or other. I fell asleep." In the case of another user comment, "I think you're sexy," Siri responded, "I'm just well put together," a joke predicated on Siri's performative awareness of being a machine. When the user posed the follow up question, "Do you think I'm sexy?" Siri responded, "Very much so."<sup>38</sup> This example not only illustrates an instance of Siri's sexualization, but also how Siri is designed to avoid alienating the user. As Jenny Davis argues, Siri's subservient role as secretary and service provider is coupled with her sexualization, feminization, and personification through the anthropomorphic gendering of Siri as female.<sup>39</sup> The user's fantasy of control over the machine mystifies the ways the user is also subordinated to the machine through the capitalist surveillance of the users' attention. Not only is user data collected to improve Siri's technology, but a 2015 report also alleges that third parties are mining Siri voice recordings for commercial gain.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, as Alexandra Chasin points out, "electronics stabilize the idea that a service class of being(s) is proper and even necessary; here, electronics participate in, and thereby reinforce, the unequal social and psychological dynamics upon which the myth of a constantly expanding middle class depends."<sup>41</sup> Thus, visions of machine subservience also do ideological work in perpetuating the idea that there are a class of workers, subordinated by gender and race, whose purpose is to make it easier for others to live and work.

With contemporary online personalization in the form of targeted advertisements and recommendation algorithms, the interaction between users and personalization technologies is marketed as meaningful and fulfilling in that personalization provides the service of tailored options rather than mass-produced, standardized products, which theoretically saves users from both the inefficiencies and dissatisfactions of mass culture. Mark Andrejevic describes the discourse of the new media economy as a "now-it-can-be-told" promotional strategy: "It turns out that critical theorists were right about industrial capitalism all along: it is oppressive, top-down, and alienating after all. We can finally admit this because now we have the technology to leave it all behind."<sup>42</sup> Personalization is framed as a means of organizing the relationship between consumers and producers in ways that take into consideration individual preferences and desires as opposed to being a form of media that imposes uniform desire for standardized products.<sup>43</sup>

What distinguishes personalization from mass culture—where consumers can only passively consume the advertisement or commodity—is that personalization is self-reflexive and interactive in that consumers must make choices, indicate preferences, and are thus constantly investing time in improving the act of consuming in order to be presented with better options. The marketing discourse celebrating personalization frames it as a means of replacing the emphasis on production with an emphasis on consumers in a way that is highly personalized and individualized. This discourse also marks a shift towards structuring desires in terms of "preferences." Davenport and Beck argue that mass culture led to an "inordinate desire for individual-level attention" because it was incapable of addressing individual consumer preferences.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, personalization allegedly overcomes the inability of mass culture to provide meaningfully differentiated commodities. And yet, while personalization is marketed as a service for consumer empowerment through the importance placed on the user's desires and preferences, it is simultaneously a technology for monitoring, aggregating, and exploiting user data.

Personalization technologies are predicated on rationalizing, managing, and monitoring time and space outside the traditional workplace in order to influence individual consumers' choices. Platforms and applications track user behavior, buying habits, and

demographic data in order to more efficiently allocate how goods and services are advertised online. Ubiquitous leisure-time surveillance thus fragments consumers into characteristics and behavioral patterns for the purposes of strategically targeting them. Oscar Gandy describes this technique of market governance as the “panoptic sort,” the “all seeing eye of the difference machine that guide the global capitalist system.”<sup>45</sup> The panoptic sort classifies individuals based on their perceived market value, and individuals actively participate in their own classification through their engagement with brands and services.<sup>46</sup> Individuals are thus taught, through their engagement with digital media technologies, to make their information, desires, and needs legible to these classificatory regimes.

Marketing insiders celebrate personalization for its capacity to supersede standardized mass culture and actually “know” the consumer—much like Negroponte’s vision for the perfect digital butler—using consumer data to tailor the ads, services, and commodities users see.<sup>47</sup> Given that data collection is predicated on monitoring users in order to track their preferences and behaviors, personalization necessarily requires the surveillance of users’ leisure time. Data analysis presents certain subjects with attractive options, while withholding these options from others, based on predictive models of risk. High-risk consumers “will never be informed about or offered the best deals” because the likelihood of return on capitalist investment is deemed low.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, companies like Facebook have been shown to allow advertisers to target or exclude users based on characteristics related to race, gender, class, and ability in relation to a range of goods and services, including housing, employment, and credit, which has culminated, most recently, in a charge for violating the Fair Housing Act.<sup>49</sup> Target advertising thus reproduces structural inequalities by reinforcing hierarchies of wealth and access.<sup>50</sup> Even though what the user sees is often framed in terms of personal desire and preference, the presentation of choices online is often based on a computational assessment of the potential profitability of that consumer’s attention, compounded by racist, sexist, classist, and ableist ideas about the “desired” market for a particular ad.

Despite the fact that user data creates profit for retailers and commercial platforms that leverage the data in the advertising marketplace for distributing consumer choices, digital advertisers market personalization to consumers as a means of helping them overcome the “labor” of decision-making—the time and energy required to make choices in a market oversaturated with information. This marketing strategy parallels the twentieth century presentation of domestic technologies as laborsaving, subservient objects, as seen in the examples of vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, and “robot slaves,” discussed earlier. Marketing discourse portrays personalization as a means of reducing the subjective perception of information overload and enabling subjects to use their time more effectively and strategically. The Digital Advertising Alliance explains to users that

When inferences about your interests are used to help select the ads you see online, the ads you receive become more useful. You get more relevant information about the products and services that may appeal to you . . . Getting the right ads at the right time not only can save you time and money, but helps you avoid seeing ads that just aren’t relevant to your needs.<sup>51</sup>

Personalization and the metric of relevancy promise to provide users with a means of overcoming information saturation and superfluous choices. In order to offer users the most “relevant” experiences, platform providers, firms, and advertising agencies make use of the information users produce about themselves to deliver the content and goods they are most likely to click on or purchase. In this sense, information overload and the metric of relevancy help render leisure time rationalized—made efficient through time

management and preference monitoring—through the “assistance” of personalization technology predicated on the surveillance of user behavior and choices. In the case of Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa, another virtual assistant with a feminized voice, user data collection determines what recommendations users receive, which also makes users less likely to explore options outside of the popular content these services prioritize.<sup>52</sup>

Developments in artificial intelligence for smart speakers like Echo, Google Home, and Apple Homepod are on the horizon, which would allow these devices to use sound recognition technology to promote brand-specific advertising as well as health-related treatments.<sup>53</sup> This form of data collection not only poses a significant risk to the security of users’ sensitive information should the data be mismanaged or hacked, but these products are also inherently designed to track user behavior for collecting information assets that can then be leveraged to improve the products’ services, generate revenue in the advertising marketplace, and discriminate against users through the selective distribution of consumer choices.

## Leisure-Time Surveillance and Marxist Feminism

How then should the link between the marketing of domestic technologies for the home and personalization technologies influence a political response to the rationalization and exploitation of leisure time online? It would be instructive to consider the significance of the Wages for Housework movement and how their insights might inform an analysis of the profits extracted from online attentiveness, given that both domestic labor and online leisure are sites of capitalist oppression outside the traditional workday. The Marxist feminists of the Wages for Housework movement identified how the conceptualization of domestic labor as non-work concealed the ways that unwaged reproductive work was essential to the capitalist mode of production. As Leopoldina Fortunati explains:

Although reproduction appears as the creation of non-value, it clearly contributes to the creation of value as a crucial, integral part of the capitalist cycle . . . Thus the real difference between production and reproduction is not that of value/non-value, but that while production both *is* and *appears as* the creation of value, reproduction *is the creation of value but appears otherwise.*<sup>54</sup>

Reproduction is the precondition for production and thus creates value for capital. Additionally, the division of labor between waged work and unwaged reproductive work proceeds along the lines of gender, constructing domestic labor as implicitly feminine and therefore natural. While domestic labor reproduces the working body of the laborer, it also functions as a key site of capitalist socialization: the family. Selma James explains that the family is the site for socializing and disciplining children to the demands of the capitalist organization of work while simultaneously serving as the center of consumption, reserve labor, and the reproduction of the worker.<sup>55</sup> The refusal to recognize domestic work as a form of labor kept women auxiliary to the general struggle against capitalism and outside the conceptualization of the working class. This invalidation of the domestic sphere as a site of labor perpetuated women’s isolation in the home and, for Mariarosa Dalla Costa, deprived them of the experience of collectively organizing and planning mass struggles against capitalism.<sup>56</sup>

The demand for the recognition of women’s role in creating value for capital allowed women to become protagonists in the struggle against it. This demand also provided women with a means of overthrowing their spatial isolation in the home, “breaking the tradition of the privatized female, with all its rivalry, and reconstructing a real solidarity among women.”<sup>57</sup> The wage laborer as an exclusively male working-class formulation perpetuated the appearance of women’s labor as “a personal service outside of capital”

rather than integral to the capitalist mode of production and an intensified space of exploitation.<sup>58</sup> The “shadow of the single wage given to the male worker in exchange for his work within the process of production” meant for Fortunati that both capitalism and the male worker are able to control and discipline women and children.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Fortunati argued that the refusal to recognize the exploitation of the domestic sphere is a self-defeating tendency of the working class because it invisibilizes the full extent of “the cycle of surplus labor, i.e. of exploitation.”<sup>60</sup>

The Wages for Housework movement viewed the struggle for wages as a means of mapping women’s relation to the totality of capitalist domination—a way to demystify and denaturalize domestic and reproductive labor.<sup>61</sup> The demand for wages was a tool in the struggle against capital’s exploitation of domestic labor and helped break the association of housework with natural feminine responsibility.<sup>62</sup> While for Marx, the wage concealed the production of surplus value by creating the illusion of a fair exchange (labor for wages), for Marxist feminists the wage also concealed and delegitimized labor outside the wage-labor relation and perpetuated women’s subordination to both men and capital.

While the demand for wages helps to demystify the wage system as a gendered system of domination and a vehicle of capitalist exploitation of time outside the traditional boundaries of the workday, for Weeks it “nonetheless demands an expansion of the wage relation rather than a transformation of its terms.”<sup>63</sup> And while for Marxist feminists, the demand for wages was not simply a demand for remuneration but an attempt to denaturalize housework as a natural feminine responsibility and generate sites of refusal, this demand was nonetheless recuperated into existing conditions under capitalism.<sup>64</sup> The struggle for wages was reduced to a struggle to have domestic labor recognized as labor within the capitalist organization of life, thus maintaining the integrity of the wage system that always already deprives the worker the full value of her labor.<sup>65</sup> What the Wages for Housework movement anticipated was the inability of capital to adequately measure productivity, a crisis that has only intensified under conditions of post-Fordism and the surveillance regime of personalization.

The significance of the Wages for Housework movement for thinking about exploitation and online leisure time is in many ways crystallized in Laurel Ptak’s “Wages for Facebook” provocation. Initially presented at a 2013 group exhibition at UC San Diego’s University Art Gallery prior to circulating on the web, Ptak appropriates Silvia Federici’s 1975 manifesto by replacing the word “housework” with “Facebook” and by reframing the demands and the critique in terms of social networking. Through this appropriation, Ptak conceptualizes the profit extracted from online leisure activity as a form of unremunerated labor. Ptak states in the opening of her piece, “They say it’s friendship. We say it’s unwaged work. With every like, chat, tag or poke our subjectivity turns them a profit.”<sup>66</sup> Whereas the Wages for Housework movement extended the Marxist critique of factory labor to the home, “Wages for Facebook” includes social networking under the category of highly exploited and unrecognized work, where user information is the commodity users produce about themselves during their time social networking. In “Wages for Facebook,” the demand for wages is theoretically a tool for making visible the exploitation underpinning so-called “leisure time” online. Additionally, like domestic work and its construction as a naturalized condition of femininity, capital figures social networking, according to the “Wages For Facebook” provocation, as a “natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity to make us accept unwaged work . . . We are seen as users or potential friends, not workers in a struggle.”<sup>67</sup> Just as Dalla Costa asserted that the unwaged condition of housework prevented women from struggling against it, using the demand for a wage as a means of centering women in the struggle against capital, “Wages For Facebook” calls for a wage to demystify the value produced by online

activity and challenge the ways that users have been socialized to believe such value-creating activity is an act of friendship rather than labor.<sup>68</sup> It is thus the exploitation of subjectivity—users' desires and connections to others—that Ptak's piece centers. Ptak's provocation also provides an account of personalization as a technique for exploiting the data users produce about themselves online rather than merely a service that caters to user preferences.

The fact that time outside the wage-relation is increasingly subjected to techniques of surveillance and rationalization potentially reinforces the argument that personalization can be theorized as a site of user labor. After all, if surveillance is an integral part of leisure time online, and if online behavior produces valuable data, perhaps consumption and attentiveness online can be conceptualized as a form of work or production. This argument is in keeping with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's theory of "factory-society":

laboring processes have moved outside the factory walls to invest the entire society. In other words, the apparent decline of the factory as site of production does not mean a decline of the regime and discipline of factory production, but means rather that it is no longer limited to a particular site in society. It has insinuated itself throughout all forms of social production, spreading like a virus. All of society is now permeated through and through with the regime of the factory, that is, with the rules of the specifically capitalist relations of production.<sup>69</sup>

Jarrett has rightfully pointed out that, "for anyone who is not a white, cis-, het- man, it is difficult to see precisely what is novel about the conditions in which all of life is subsumed into capital."<sup>70</sup> The domestic space and interpersonal relations have never been sites of "autonomy and agency but rather . . . venues of (en)forced and uncompensated work, as well as situations of domination and surveillance."<sup>71</sup> Drawing parallels between the unpaid, quasi-voluntary work of the private, domestic sphere and consumer online activity, she argues that this activity is a form of exploited labor, stating that, "[l]ike housewives, consumers receive little or no direct financial compensation for their contributions to the revenue-generating mechanisms of digital media sites so that all of their labour produces surplus-value for the website provider."<sup>72</sup>

However, the idea that online leisure activity is a form of unwaged labor often leads to the framing of the problem as one of remuneration, a framework that is more easily recuperated within the present terms of capitalist exchange. Jaron Lanier's *Who Owns the Future*, for example, illustrates the ways a critique of exploitation in the digital economy can be transformed into new forms of exploited work. Lanier argues that users should be compensated in the form of micropayments for the data that is expropriated from them online. He asserts:

Pay people for information gleaned from them if that information turns out to be valuable. If observation of you yields data that makes it easier for a robot to seem like a natural conversationalist, or for a political campaign to target voters with its message, then you ought to be owed money for the use of that valuable data. It wouldn't exist without you, after all.<sup>73</sup>

For Lanier, the problem is not necessarily ubiquitous surveillance or practices of target advertising that differentially price and skew the distribution of market choices, but the lack of compensation.<sup>74</sup> "Free" information allows for the concentration of wealth in the hands of platform providers rather than its distribution across user networks. Therefore,

for Lanier, the exchange of user information for nanopayments is a more equitable way of distributing wealth.

Lanier asserts that a system of nanopayments would result in “intrinsic, inalienable *commercial*/rights to data that wouldn’t exist without you.”<sup>75</sup> Lanier thus extends the capitalist terms of exchange—labor for wages—while overlooking the ways that technologies of personalization are a means of subjectivating users as individuals that are governable through the presentation of market choices.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, nanopayments will hardly return to the worker the full value of her information. Wages will only help to legitimate the platform’s “right” to use the only thing the worker is permitted to sell: her data. Perhaps this is why commercial services have been eager to capitalize on users’ desires to have the collection of their data remunerated.

Services like Datacoup have emerged, which encourage consumers to bring their data to market just like their capacity for labor in the context of the workplace. Their mission statement is as follows:

Our mission [is] to help people unlock the value of their personal data. Almost every link in the economic chain has their hand in our collective data pocket. Data brokers in the US alone account for a \$15bn industry, yet they have zero relationship with the consumers whose data they harvest and sell. They offer no discernible benefit back to the producers of this great data asset- you. Datacoup is changing this asymmetric dynamic that exists around our personal data. The first and most important step is getting people compensated for the asset they produce. We are building for a future where individuals like you are in control of your data and are the chief beneficiaries of its value.<sup>77</sup>

While services like Datacoup call attention to the fact that free services online are predicated on the extraction of data, the ability to exchange one’s private information in exchange for a wage merely reproduces the power asymmetries of the workplace. It should come as no surprise that Datacoup itself is the primary purchaser of the data, and that the majority of offers are in the cents. Thus, the demand for wages as compensation for the exploitation of user data fails to challenge what Weeks described in relation to the Wages for Housework movement as the “dominant legitimating discourse of work,” which ultimately recuperates anti-capitalist impulses into the existing terms of society.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The Wages for Housework movement worked to show that the boundaries between work and family are a patriarchal construct perpetuated in the service of capitalism: by naming part of what happens in the family as work, the demand for wages challenges the division between work as a site of exploitation and the family as a “freely invented site of authentic and purely voluntary relations.”<sup>79</sup> Additionally, the Wages for Housework movement demonstrated that time outside of productive labor can be put in the service of capital accumulation. For Cox and Federici, this means the real workday is twenty-four hours long, as domestic labor does not have a fixed schedule.<sup>80</sup> What this speaks to is not the necessity to assign a wage but the precarious distinction between waged and unwaged time, and the ways that distinction has perpetuated women’s subordination to both men and capital. Following Tithi Bhattacharya, I have approached Marxism as “paradigmatic rather than prescriptive . . . a framework or tool to understand social relations and thereby change them. This means, necessarily, that such a tool will sometimes need to be sharpened and honed to fit new, emerging social realities.”<sup>81</sup> In order to theorize the rationalization of leisure time in a way that resists recuperation, I have argued that the terms of the struggle should be shifted from a claim to have online

leisure recognized as labor and adequately compensated by capital to an effort to problematize how the rest of life beyond the wage-relation is harnessed by capital to its “time, spaces, rhythms, purposes, and values.”<sup>82</sup> The struggle can then be redefined as existing not only between capital and labor but also between capital and the subjects that become vehicles for capital accumulation through the production and management of their desires.

When trying to develop leftist visions for the future that include full automation, such as the post-work politics of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, one needs to account for the ways power relations are inscribed into technologies, and the ways technologies shape desires and interpersonal relationships.<sup>83</sup> One cannot assume that demands for full automation, even when complemented with a Universal Basic Income, will lead to greater self-determination for all. Theories of capitalist exploitation and control through digital technologies must address how the gendered and racialized fantasy of machine subordination conceals the rationalization of leisure time, which in fact subordinates users to the rhythms and demands of the digital economy, while perpetuating cultural ideologies that reinforce race- and gender-based oppressions.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank her colleagues at Purdue University, Dr. Megha Anwer, Dr. Jason Parry, Dr. Nathan Swanson, and Dr. Katie Jarriel, as well as the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Lateral*, for their insightful feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

---

## Notes

1. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), 42. ↗
2. Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016) 5. ↗
3. Susan Strasser, *Never Done: The History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Ruth Schwartz Cowen, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1983); Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). ↗
4. Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Power of Women Collective and the Falling Wall Press, 1975), 2. ↗
5. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem With Work* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011). ↗
6. Christine Frederick, *The New Housekeeping: Efficiency Studies In Home Management* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 182. ↗
7. Selma James, “Introduction,” in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (Bristol: Falling Wall, 1975), 5–20. ↗
8. Anna Reser and Leila McNeill, “Gender in the Mid-Century Kitchen” *LadyScience*, December 18, 2015, <http://tinyletter.com/LadyScience/letters/lady-science-no-15-gender-in-the-mid-century-kitchen>. ↗
9. Christine Frederick, *The New Housekeeping*, 182. ↗
10. Christine Frederick, *Household Engineering Scientific Management in the Home* (Chicago: American School of Home Economics, 1920), 3. ↗
11. O. O. Binder, “You’ll Own ‘Slaves’ by 1965,” *Mechanix Illustrated* (1957), 62–65. ↗
12. Binder, “You’ll Own,” 63. ↗
13. Binder, “You’ll Own,” 65. ↗

14. Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire* (New York: Pantheon, 1986). 
15. Forty, *Objects*, 209. 
16. Forty, *Objects*, 215. 
17. Vanessa May, "Working at Home: Domestic Workers in the Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century United States," *History Compass* 10, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org.ezproxy.lib.psu.edu/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2011.00832.x>. 
18. Forty, *Objects*, 214. 
19. Forty, *Objects*, 219. 
20. Elizabeth Patton and Mimi Choi, introduction to *Home Sweat Home: Perspectives on Housework and Modern Relationships*, ed. Elizabeth Patton and Mimi Choi (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), xvii. 
21. Paul Atkinson, "The Curious Case of the Kitchen Computer: Products and Non-Products in Design History," *Journal of Design History* 23, no. 2 (2010): 163-179, 177. 
22. Dag Spicer, "If You Can't Stand the Coding, Stay Out of the Kitchen," *Dr.Dobbs*, August 12, 2000, <http://www.drdobbs.com/architecture-and-design/if-you-can't-stand-the-coding-stay-out-of/184404040>. 
23. Atkinson, "Curious Case," 177. 
24. Paul Dourish and Genevieve Bell, *Divining a Digital Future: Mess and Mythology in Ubiquitous Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011), 161. 
25. Elaine Lally, *At Home With Computers* (Oxford: BERG, 2002), 3. 
26. Lally, *At Home*, 51. 
27. Lally, *At Home*, 43. 
28. "Apple Lisa Promotional Video," accessed May 30, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-G9S-h2w2dU>. 
29. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2006), 105. 
30. Nicholas Negroponte, "Less Is More: Interface Agents as Digital Butlers," *Wired Magazine*, June 1, 1994, <http://www.wired.com/1994/06/negroponte-5/>. 
31. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1995), 150. 
32. Markus Krajewski, "Ask Jeeves: Servants as Search Engines," *Grey Room* 38 (2010): 6-19. 
33. Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 816. 
34. Miriam E. Sweeney, "Not Just a Pretty (Inter)face: A Critical Analysis of Microsoft's 'Ms. Dewey,'" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013), 79. 
35. Hal Varian, "Beyond Big Data," *Business Economics* 49, no 1 (2014): 29. 
36. Apple, "Siri Does More Than Ever. Even Before You Ask," accessed November 15, 2018, <https://www.apple.com/siri/>. 
37. Mackenzie Kruvant, "24 Ways to Get Siri To Bring Out Her True Sassiness," *Buzzfeed*, January 19, 2014, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mackenziekruvant/siri-is-one-sassy-broad>. 
38. Kruvant, "24 Ways." 
39. Jenny Davis, "Siri: Intersections of Gender, Economy and Technology," *Cyborgology*, October 24, 2011, <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/10/24/siri-intersections-of-gender-economy-and-technology/>. 

40. Jill Krasny, "Siri is Definitely Sharing Your Data With Third Parties," *Esquire*, March 13, 2015, <https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/cars/a33654/apple-is-sharing-your-siri-data-with-third-parties/>. 
41. Alexandra Chasin, "Class and Its Close Relations: Identities among Women, Servants and Machines," in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 93. 
42. Mark Andrejevic, "Estrangement 2.0," *World Picture Journal* 6 (2011): 1. 
43. Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *Attention Economy: Understanding The New Currency of Big Business* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 124. 
44. Davenport and Beck, *Attention*, 69. 
45. Oscar H. Gandy, *The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993), 1. 
46. Gandy, *Panoptic Sort*, 10. 
47. Davenport and Beck, *Attention*, 124. 
48. Bill Davidow, "Redlining for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/03/redlining-for-the-21st-century/284235/>. 
49. Adam Gabbatt, "Facebook Charged with Housing Discrimination in Targeted Ads," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/mar/28/facebook-ads-housing-discrimination-charges-us-government-hud>. 
50. Joseph Turow, *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). 
51. Digital Advertising Alliance, "The Benefits of Relevant Advertising," *YourAdChoices*, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://youradchoices.com/benefits>. 
52. Melanie Lefkowitz, "Study: Smart Speakers Make Passive Listeners," *Cornell Chronicle*, November 27, 2018, <http://news.cornell.edu/stories/2018/11/study-smart-speakers-make-passive-listeners>. 
53. Paul Marks, "Smarter Voice Assistants Recognize Your Favorite Brands—and Health," *ACM News*, December 11, 2018, <https://cacm.acm.org/news/233329-smarter-voice-assistants-recognize-your-favorite-brandsand-health/fulltext>. 
54. Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1995), 8. 
55. James, "Introduction," 6. 
56. Mariarosa Dalla Costa. "Women and the Subversion of the Community," in *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* by Mariarosa Dall Costa and Selma James (Bristol: Falling Wall, 1975), 28. 
57. Dalla Costa. "Women," 36. 
58. Dalla Costa. "Women," 26. 
59. Fortunati, *Arcane*, 95. 
60. Fortunati, *Arcane*, 95. 
61. Weeks, *Problem*, 129. 
62. Nicole Cox and Silvia Federici, *Counter-planning from the Kitchen* (Bristol: Falling Wall, 1976), 8. 
63. Cox and Federici, *Counter-planning*, 137. 
64. Federici, "Wages," 5. 

65. Weeks, *Problem*, 230. 
66. "Wages For Facebook," accessed September 1, 2016, <http://wagesforfacebook.com/>. 
67. "Wages For Facebook." 
68. Dalla Costa. "Women." 
69. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-form* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1994), 25. 
70. Kylie Jarrett, "Through the Reproductive Lens: Labour and Struggle at the Intersection of Culture and Economy," in *Digital Objects Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, ed. David Chandler and Christian Fuchs (London, UK: University of Westminster Press, 2019), 105). 
71. Jarrett, "Through the Reproductive," 105. 
72. Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 11. 
73. Jaron Lanier, *Who Owns The Future?* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 9. 
74. Frank Pasquale, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). 
75. Lanier, *Who Owns*, 317. 
76. Peter Miller and Nikolas S. Rose, *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008). 
77. Datacoup, "About Us," accessed September 2, 2016, <https://datacoup.com/docs#how-it-works>. 
78. Weeks, *Problem*, 13. 
79. Weeks, *Problem*, 129. 
80. Cox and Federici, *Counter-planning*, 12. 
81. Tithi Bhattacharya, "Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory," in *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya and Lise Vogel (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2017), 19. 
82. Bhattacharya, "Introduction: Mapping," 29. 
83. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London, UK: Verso, 2016). 

 [Bio](#)

**Lindsay Weinberg**

Lindsay Weinberg is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Innovative Studies with the Honors College and Polytechnic Institute at Purdue University. Her research and teaching are at the intersection of media studies, feminist theory, and critical political economy, with an emphasis on digital culture and the history of technology and design. She received her Ph.D. from the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2018. Her work has appeared in *Lateral*, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, and *Impost: A Journal of Critical and Creative Work*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

S. L. Nelson, "Sex Work and Social Media: Policy, Identity, and Privacy in Networked Publics and Counterpublics," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.4>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Sex Work and Social Media: Policy, Identity, and Privacy in Networked Publics and Counterpublics

**S. L. Nelson**

**ABSTRACT** Using the online practices of sex workers as a focal point, this project examines how the public/private dichotomy is governed and complicated within Social Networking Sites (SNS). It concentrates in particular on Facebook and FetLife, arguing that the former functions as a normative public and the latter as a counterpublic due, in part, to the differing regulations each site implements regarding sex work. The project centers on a qualitative study of the rhetorical strategies online sex workers use to self-identify and self-advocate, as well as the tactics they employ to maintain privacy and avoid the phenomenon of "context collapse." Through the results of this study, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of end user cyber security tactics, considering the scholarship on digital surveillance and privacy. In addressing these strategies, it underscores the importance of privacy specifically for vulnerable populations of digital publics.

For many Social Networking Site (SNS) users, privacy is desired, but for sex workers, it is a necessity. As a result, sex workers often engage in end user cyber security tactics that illustrate possibilities and challenges for a general population of SNS users. Using the online practices of sex workers as a focal point, this article examines how privacy is governed and complicated within SNS publics. I present a qualitative study of the rhetorical and technological strategies that site users who are involved with or adjacent to sex work communities use to self-identify, as well as the cyber security tactics they employ to maintain privacy and avoid the phenomenon of "context collapse."<sup>1</sup> I begin by describing the sites used for the study, Facebook and FetLife, and by discussing the affordances and limitations of networked publics and counterpublics, considering each site's approach to data collection. I then provide a review of the domestic legislation regarding sex work insofar as it relates to offline and online spaces, as well as an analysis of each website's policy regarding sex work. Through the results of this study, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of end user cyber security tactics, considering the scholarship on digital surveillance and privacy.

This article makes a dichotomous intervention. First, I expand the conversation surrounding digitally networked publics to distinguish between normative publics and counterpublics. Second, I locate and examine the intersection between online sex work, surveillance, and privacy as it exists within these publics. A great deal of scholarly work has considered the ways in which sex workers manufacture and manage their professional identities; I extend this scholarship to provide a more detailed account of the methods online sex workers use to maintain these identities within and between digitally networked publics. In addressing these strategies, I underscore the importance of privacy specifically for vulnerable populations of digital publics.

### Site Description: Facebook and FetLife

Individuals involved in online sex work typically maintain multiple profiles across social networking platforms, apart from those specifically dedicated to sex work, for both personal and professional reasons.<sup>2</sup> In this section, I provide an in-depth analysis of the sites Facebook and FetLife in terms of their approaches to data collection and the ways in which they regulate and limit expression regarding sex work. These sites represent disparate policies and popularity amongst users, and surveys distributed to users through each platform provided a productive variation in results.

Bridging multiple social circles, Facebook is an SNS that encourages its users to connect with family members, friends, and acquaintances from different stages and circles in the user's life.<sup>3</sup> During registration, Facebook requires users to sign up with "the name they go by in everyday life," and, in tension with that requirement, then clarifies that it should be a name that also appears on the user's official ID (e.g. a driver's license, passport, etc.).<sup>4</sup> In 2011, Facebook introduced its "Timeline" feature, and switched from what José van Dijck identifies as a database model to that of a narrative model by encouraging users to fill in personal details to construct their own unique stories.<sup>5</sup> Christian Fuchs further observes that, employing web 2.0 surveillance tactics, the site then uses this data to "[tailor] advertisements to the consumption interests of the users."<sup>6</sup> Demanding information and authenticity from its users, Facebook operates by transforming public identities into marketable data.

Proclaiming itself to be "like Facebook, but run by kinksters like you and me," FetLife is an SNS centered on the expression of user sexuality. FetLife is openly geared towards participants in the BDSM lifestyle, but sets itself apart from dating sites by encouraging platonic and community-driven connections, as well as romantic and sexual ones.<sup>7</sup> FetLife does not require users to provide their "real names." In fact, it claims, "some people don't mind you using their full real name and others don't want you to even use their first name," and encourages users to respect others' levels of comfort.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Facebook, FetLife did not fully switch over to the "narrative model" indicated by Van Dijck, and it still functions very much as a database. Though the site presents the user with advertisements, these are typically randomized materials from the site's sponsors rather than content catered to the user through a series of algorithms. Though similar in structure, these sites operate as inherently different publics due to their disparate approaches to surveillance and data collection and to the adaptation of federal prostitution legislation into site policy.

## Networked Publics and Counterpublics

The theoretical framework of networked publics and counterpublics serves as a helpful tool for understanding the meaningful differences between these two sites. Michael Warner explains that a public is formed "by the virtue of being addressed" by an external factor, such as a speaker, a performance, or even a text, and the web of discourse it incites.<sup>9</sup> In the case of SNS, sites and the networks they constitute hail users in subjectivity. danah boyd further defines networked publics as "publics that are restructured by networked technology," and states that they allow users to create a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of connections, and interact with other members of the system.<sup>10</sup> While meeting the same qualifications as a traditional public, digitally networked publics operate as a specific subset of the category that adhere to their own structural rules.

Just as in non-digital publics, subjects of digitally networked publics employ various rhetorical tactics to appropriately navigate, express themselves, and interact with other members of the public. Speaking to a phenomenon they call "context collapse," which occurs when an audience of real, potential, and imagined viewers from various social circles of the user's life overlap, Marwick and boyd note that users in networked publics

rely on tactics such as “impression management,” “self monitoring,” and shifts in self-presentation in order to construct their identity in a way to cater to the expectations of each all at once.<sup>11</sup> Van Dijck observes, however, that because these sites are typically structured in a way that calls for an authentic identity across all platforms, maintaining separate identities on each is a challenge.<sup>12</sup>

While both Facebook and FetLife function as networked publics in which users rely on these methods to avoid context collapse, the types of publics hailed dictate the extent to which users must employ such methods. Warner explains that, while counterpublics meet the same criteria as publics, they are also conceptually dissimilar by merit of the facts that are “formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment.”<sup>13</sup> He further states that they “differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public.”<sup>14</sup> Because counterpublics are actively in conflict with normative publics and strive to set themselves apart from the limits of such, the privacy of their members is imperative, thus complicating Van Dijck’s conjecture that digitally networked publics will consistently attempt to cohere their users’ identities between platforms.

Facebook and FetLife operate as disparate publics. Jansson et al. note, “No longer do we have one major national public sphere (cf. Habermas 1989); rather, with the emergence of social media the mediatized public sphere has become splintered into numerous smaller public spheres.”<sup>15</sup> Not only does Facebook function as a normative public sphere and FetLife as a counterpublic sphere due to each site’s purpose (i.e. Facebook as a place to connect with friends and family and FetLife as a space to meet other members of the kink community), but they also differ in relation to their conduct regarding data collection and surveillance. In defining surveillance capitalism, Zuboff explains that it monetizes data obtained through surveillance.<sup>16</sup> Facebook adheres to this model because, as Fuchs observes, “it stores, compares, assesses and sells the personal data and usage behaviour of several 100 million users.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, the power dynamic between the site and its members is unidirectional; by creating an account with Facebook, the user agrees to part with their data for the company’s profit.

If this system is the norm, then FetLife, as a counterpublic, acts in conflict to it. It does so first through its refusal to collect accurate data about its members, thus providing them with an extra layer of protection against context collapse. Second, it does so through its privacy policy, which claims to only share personal information with “certain trusted third parties to perform functions and provide services to [the site] . . . but only to the extent necessary to perform these functions and provide such services.”<sup>18</sup> The policy goes on to state (from the perspective of the site managers), “Our personal information is on FetLife as well, we would never use companies that don’t share a similar privacy philosophy as us.”<sup>19</sup> While FetLife does not elaborate on these third parties, it makes a rhetorical effort to establish itself as separate from surveillance-based publics both through its claim to data collection as intrinsic to functionality and through its managers’ self-identification with the site’s members. The distinction between Facebook and FetLife as publics is further defined in each site’s implementation of domestic sex work legislation within their policies.

## Domestic Sex Work Legislation and Site Policy

Enforcing legislation within online arenas is a tricky situation at best, and legislation pertaining to sex work is no exception. Here, I will broadly outline United States prostitution regulation before delving into the nuances of this type of labor and discussing how each SNS addresses it. Within the US legal system, sex work is regulated on a state-by-state basis. With the exception of eleven counties in Nevada in which it is legalized (a

labor status that comes with its own set of rules and limitations), it is criminalized to varying degrees across the nation.<sup>20</sup> Legally, sex work is framed as “prostitution” as a means of differentiating it from human trafficking, which extends beyond the sex trade and encompasses all forms of enforced labor, including that performed by “domestic, agriculture, and sweatshop workers.”<sup>21</sup> The United States Department of Justice further defines prostitution as “a sexual act or contact with another person in return for giving or receiving a fee or a thing of value,” but these laws also tend to also encompass pimping, pandering, and commercial sex, or sexual acts either consensually or coercively exchanged for capital.<sup>22</sup> Though this definition is applicable to most types of sex work, it is disproportionately enforced in the street-based sector.<sup>23</sup>

The conflation of sex work human trafficking in the legislative sphere has detrimental effects on the community, especially in the online sector. In April 2018, U.S. politicians signed both the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) into law.<sup>24</sup> Despite the well-intentioned rhetoric of the legislation’s nomenclature to prevent human trafficking, it is clear that FOSTA and SESTA are less concerned with the righteous defense of the archetypical female victim and more focused on limiting both the protections, operations, and rights of those who intentionally and willingly engage in sex work, and more broadly, the freedom and neutrality of the Internet. First, there are already substantial legislative provisions that oppose human trafficking in the United States, namely the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, and these new bills do little to further their scope of this protection. Additionally, before the bills were even signed, mainstream news sources were quick to report that federal authorities succeeded in seizing and taking down Backpage—a site that many sex workers used for advertising.<sup>25</sup> By reducing the more popular sites through which sex workers connect with their clients, this legislation reduces the chances of authorities locating victims of human trafficking due to the erasure of sexually explicit ads while simultaneously forcing professional sex workers to either promote their services on more illicit sites or return to street-based options. In part due to this continued legislative focus on online spaces, SNS platforms adjust their policies to adhere to the law.

Facebook is clear and direct in its restrictions pertaining to online sex work. Many of its restrictions relate directly to United States law; however, some take an extra step to prohibit online sex work that is not strictly illegal (e.g. prohibiting advertising for users not in the United States, banning content that does not fall under US prostitution law, etc.). Echoing the concerns of sex work abolitionists and human trafficking legislation, it explicitly prohibits users from posting sexual content involving minors. It also removes content involving sexual violence and pornography, which is arguably in line with United States Code 18, section 1460–2252C. However, it also goes as far as prohibiting the sharing of content containing nudity and “descriptions of sexual acts that go into vivid detail,” content which typically is not strictly prohibited on sites that do not cater to minors. Most relevantly, Facebook bans both prostitution and the solicitation of escort services.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, it constructs a blanket of censorship over all forms of online sex work.

Like Facebook, FetLife complies with United States law regarding prostitution (despite being owned by the Canadian company, BitLove), but it allows users to engage in other forms of online sex work. Its Terms of Use explicitly state that the site does not allow users to “solicit or sell any kind of sex for hire.” However, in strict contrast to Facebook’s policy, it does allow users to post explicit sexual content (e.g. amateur pornographic photos and videos, erotic writing, etc.) as long as the participants are eighteen or older. Moreover, it says nothing about escort services and even permits users to create groups

to explicitly “post the schedule, price list or phone number of a phone sex operator, professional Dominant or professional submissive,” though it does not allow such information to be “publicly” posted beyond these groups.<sup>27</sup> In doing so, FetLife constructs itself as a more welcoming space for those involved in online sex work.

## Online Sex Work

Beginning in the 1990s, the majority of sex work began to transition rapidly from the streets to the Internet.<sup>28</sup> Drucker and Nieri report a 50% growth in the online sector of the sex work industry between the years 1998 and 2008, and it has only expanded since then.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the scholarship on sex work has adapted to address the unique issues that arise with this shift. Earlier work on the subject has the tendency to treat sex work as inherently and inescapably violent, patriarchal, and coercive.<sup>30</sup> However, Comte notes that coercive and trafficking practices “constitute only a small portion of the reality of sex work,” and Weitzer claims that such a perspective “denies workers’ agency.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Walby acknowledges that the rise of online sex work requires workers to perform more affective labor (e.g. the “girlfriend experience”), but also provides them with greater affective and emotional rewards.<sup>32</sup> Centering the agency of the sex worker, I provide a review of the literature in this section that encompasses the distinctions between the different forms of online sex work, the subject positions of those in the industry other than that of the female worker, the safety and social benefits of using the Internet to conduct or mediate this form of labor, and the strategies that these workers use to avoid the risks common to this environment.

The online sex work industry has many different facets. It is typically categorized as a form of indoor sex work (as opposed to the more traditional street-based work), but this broader category also includes brothel workers, call girls, and bar hustlers.<sup>33</sup> Jones further distinguishes between two types of online sex work. The first involves “the use of the Internet to actually deliver a service.”<sup>34</sup> This labor includes webcam modeling, phone sex, and virtual reality experiences.<sup>35</sup> The second type refers to “the use of the Internet to market sexual services that are delivered in physical space.”<sup>36</sup> Most commonly, workers in this category use the Internet to facilitate eventual in-person interactions (e.g. by marketing services, screening clients, making appointments, etc.).<sup>37</sup> Although workers in the first category face fewer legal risks than those in the second as the services they provide are not typically illegal, privacy is crucial for both groups as they move between digital publics both for the protection of their other identities and jobs and also for their safety.

With the rise of online sex work, researchers have also broadened the scope of the field’s focus to account for the experiences of others in the industry apart from female sex workers, on whom most of the literature was originally concentrated. For instance, Holt and Blevins consider the digital discourse and communities available to clients of sex workers.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in the realm of male sex work, Pruitt provides a review of escort ads, Blackwell and Dziegielewski discuss the health risks specific to these individuals in the industry, and McLean considers the networks available to male sex workers in Australia.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, claiming that the “literature on online sex work . . . has been restricted by society’s binary logic of gender,” Jones advocates for further research regarding the situation particular to transgender workers.<sup>40</sup> Keeping this suggestion in mind, I developed my survey with an open-ended question about participant gender in order to consider representatives from across the spectrum.

Sex workers report many benefits to conducting their business online. These include finding greater enjoyment in the work, the ability to reach a wider audience at a lower cost, and the ability to screen clients before engaging in business with them through

search engines and both digitally mediated and word-of-mouth exchanges with other sex workers.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, although online sex work contains its own range of high-risk scenarios, from outcalls with strangers to unsafe sex practices, the threat of violence and arrest is considerably lower in this segment of the industry.<sup>42</sup> The Internet also offers opportunities for online sex workers to network with one another and share their experiences. McLean's study suggests that while many male sex workers are resistant to forming these networks, there are "potential benefits of associating with others on the basis of shared experience."<sup>43</sup> In her research on webcam models, Jones examines how these workers use online discussion boards to provide new models with information about the risks and rewards of the job and advice to models who encounter work-related dangers, such as doxxing, capping, and harassment.<sup>44</sup> Addressing the politics of the work, Feldman's analysis of the blog *Bound, Not Gagged* depicts how these sex worker community networks can develop into activist groups intent on distributing information and enacting policy change. Online spaces, however, come with risks as well as benefits.

Online sex workers face external and internal threats in the profession. Law enforcement agencies have myriad techniques for locating individual online sex workers. For instance, "classy website[s] with alluring photos and skillfully written ads," phishing software, or large sums of money deposited in PayPal accounts might draw police attention.<sup>45</sup> Bass's interviewees report a number of tactics they use to detect undercover police and avoid arrest, including deploying a waiting period before meeting with new clients, requiring clients to cross state lines, and even offering free sessions to known police officers.<sup>46</sup> Next, although, as Sanders indicates, sex workers use identity management techniques to separate their work from their personal lives (e.g. exclusion of certain sex acts, use of condoms, performing a specific sexual role, and preventing emotional intimacy with clients), McLean states that these is still an observable "negative impact of engagement in commercial sex upon the private sex lives" of these workers.<sup>47</sup> Finally, Jones notes that online sex workers are still at risk of verbal and physical harassment from clients and asks, "Will individual workers' ability to use technology affect their ability to protect themselves?"<sup>48</sup> My study addresses this question by locating and examining the specific rhetorical and technological strategies that online sex workers use to protect themselves in these diverse digital publics.

## Method

A queer methodology is valuable for this type of work due to its theoretical and ethical investments. Brim and Ghaziani write, "queer social research methods question the origins and effects of concepts and categories rather than reify them in an allegedly generalizable variable-oriented paradigm, because these categories do not always align with lived experiences."<sup>49</sup> In this study, I question and challenge the normative, neoliberal narratives perpetuated by the surveillance-oriented agendas of web 2.0 social networking sites. My participants' lived experiences offer productive outlets for intervening in this ideology. Queer methodologies also forefront an ethical researcher-participant dynamic. Drawing on the methods presented by both queer theory and rhetoric scholars, Dadas outlines an ethical approach to entering various online public and semi-public spaces, maintaining transparency in terms of both one's identity as a researcher and the details of the study, and distributing surveys in a way that ensures the subjects' knowledge and willingness to participate.<sup>50</sup> Jones takes this claim a step further in her chapter on queer methodology and sex work, advocating for autoethnography in queer methodology especially as it pertains to sex work research.<sup>51</sup> Throughout conducting this research, I maintained transparency regarding my subject position as a researcher and a member of these digital publics.

Beyond a queer methodology, I also draw on previous research regarding online sex work to present and discuss my results. Jenkins claims, “Internet technology can offer an opportunity to extend the scope of sex work research into new territories by providing a platform for the voices of people working in areas of the industry about which little is known.”<sup>52</sup> Through the technological slant of this study, I examine the “new territory” of online privacy practices used by sex workers in digital publics. Following McLean’s lead, I use a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis “as it [is] considered to be effective in identifying nuanced and detailed information concerning the highly personal experiences of this group.”<sup>53</sup> I ensured that my survey questions were open-ended in order to be receptive to this nuance. This is especially relevant to my demographic question about participant gender as, drawing on Jones’s observation regarding the underrepresentation of transgender workers’ experiences in the literature, I find it important to reintegrate these voices.

In order to recruit participants for this study, I began by emailing the moderators of four popular Facebook groups. I introduced myself, stated my intentions as a researcher, and asked permission to distribute my survey on their sites. Of these, the Sex Workers Outreach Project USA (SWOP-USA) group responded and maintained contact. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval for the project, I worked further with my contact from SWOP-USA to ensure that my approach to working with this community was ethical, clear, and respectful. Following Dadas’s emphasis on ensuring the subject’s knowledge and willingness to participate, I both requested consent through the participation script on the landing page of the survey and included an additional question that gave the participant the option to either grant me consent to quote their survey responses verbatim or only allow me to use their data in aggregate. After approving my survey questions, my SWOP-USA contact distributed the survey through their SNS networks.

I contacted the FetLife administrative staff with the same request. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, composing a formal project proposal, and developing a profile on the site, I received permission to distribute a link to the offsite survey on my profile and through specific boards. Due to the sensitive nature of the site, anonymity is valued highly in the FetLife community. In order to gain the trust of the site users and maintain the level of transparency for which Dadas advocates as well as the autoethnographic intervention suggested by Jones, I posted my legal name, my role as a researcher, and my involvement in the FetLife community on my profile, as well as the approved post and link to the survey. I then contacted the moderators of six boards, and received permission to post from the moderator of a popular group page. I introduced myself in the group (using both my legal name and username), provided information about the study, and distributed the link on this board.

The sample included adult individuals who identify as within or adjacent to professional BDSM and/or sex work communities. The survey was open for six months between October 2017 and April 2018, and twenty-five participants responded. Participants were recruited from the groups and pages on the aforementioned sites. Partial responses were recorded, since not all participants responded to every question. I did not record any identifying information (e.g. legal name, pseudonym, IP address) from survey participants, so the locations of many of the participants are unclear (i.e. they could be situated beyond the United States). Participants were not compensated for their participation.

I gathered data on the following categories. With regard to demographic information, I asked for participant age, identity as a sex worker, and gender identity. In terms of involvement in digital publics and privacy tactics, I asked which networking sites these participants typically use for personal and professional reasons, whether or not they take

additional precautions in maintaining their privacy and anonymity across social networking platforms, and the language they use to discuss their experiences online. Due to the relatively small sample size, it is impossible to make generalizations about online sex workers as population from the results of this study. However, my study offers new qualitative data about the privacy practices these participants employ upon which further research can be founded.

The survey reflected a wide variety of demographics in terms of participant response. Participant ages ranged from 20 to 71 with a mean of 36. In terms of gender identity, eleven participants identified as female, eight identified as male, four identified as transgender or genderqueer, one identified as intersex (IS), and two did not respond. I asked whether or not the participant identified as a sex worker. Seventeen responded, "Yes," five responded, "Sometimes/It's Complicated," one responded, "No," and two did not respond. The following sections record my findings within the categories of site usage, identity management and context collapse, and surveillance, privacy, and cyber security.

## Site Usage

The participants were asked two questions about the SNS platforms they used for personal reasons and those they use for discussing sex work. Due to the sites chosen for the survey, it is unsurprising that Facebook and FetLife were the sites most frequently indicated for these uses. Fifteen participants reported that they used Facebook for personal reasons specifically, and nine participants responded that they used FetLife. Some justified their use of social media. One participant stated that she uses "Facebook for interacting with friends/family." Another explained that she uses Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr to maintain connections with friends and her community, but does not post content. She also noted, "I also have a FetLife account, I'm a lifestyler." These initial responses underscore the claim that different communities form within different digital publics; Facebook operates as a space for individuals to connect with friends, family, and those in their local community, and FetLife as a place for those interested in maintaining a kink lifestyle.

The distinction between the two sites is further apparent in the participants' responses to the question regarding which sites they use to discuss sex work, journal their experiences, and/or support sex workers in a community setting. Eleven participants indicated that they used FetLife, and four stated that they used Facebook. Two participants provided caveats regarding the use of Facebook in this context. One clarified that he uses "secret facebook groups." Another observed, "Facebook, which pains me – it's a very insecure platform," but further remarked that, because of the site's large user base, she finds it to be a useful avenue for weighing in on the "bad information circulating in sex work communities about how to protect yourself with jerk clients and exploitative streaming platforms." The anxiety surrounding Facebook's lack of security due to its surveillance-based model is palpable in these responses. However, the site also acts as a useful platform for sex workers who are involved in the political side of the profession, such as those on which Feldman's study focuses, to share their views. Jansson et al. observe, "networked communications . . . facilitate an easy and affordable dissemination of information of the kind unlikely to circulate in traditional media."<sup>54</sup> Because Facebook is a massive SNS that encompasses a diverse range of groups, it allows those interested in spreading information greater opportunities for outreach than a smaller, more homogenous site like FetLife.

Fuchs notes that, with the rise of mass surveillance within a web 2.0 framework, the importance of community building/maintenance and collaborative information production in digital spaces has grown.<sup>55</sup> Although multiple groups can exist within one

digital public, not all digital publics have the infrastructure required to meet the privacy needs of each of their members. Bennett astutely states, “Individuals are arguably placed at risk because of their membership in, or assignment to, certain groups, rather than on the basis of their individual identities and the personal information it generates.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, it is crucial for sex workers, as a vulnerable population who face particular risks on the basis of their membership within this group, to foster communities within digital publics that can provide them with security. For these participants, Facebook exists as a public for them to correspond with “friends/family” outside of their profession, and FetLife—a counterpublic—as a space where they could safely describe their work. These findings are further reflected in the responses regarding identity management and the avoidance of context collapse.

## Identity Management and Context Collapse

Identity management is a crucial tactic for sex workers, but it is one that becomes complicated as they operate in digital publics. Building off Hochschild’s research, Sanders observes that sex workers create “manufactured identities” both to protect themselves from the psychological risks of the job and as a business strategy, and McLean, working through Minichiello and Browne, extends this claim to account for the additional sexual safety practices used by male sex workers.<sup>57</sup> The participants in my study detail a series of linguistic methods they use to establish and maintain these manufactured identities on SNS platforms. Drawing on their responses, I extend an analysis of the rhetorical strategies these individuals use to create separate personas within and between digital publics in order to avoid Marwick and boyd’s phenomenon of context collapse.

Eighteen participants stated that they use a pseudonym when engaging in sex work. Two provided caveats, stating “yes, most of the time,” and “shortened form of my real name.” Two others indicated that they use a variety of pseudonyms, explaining, “Yes—multiple names,” and “Yes. One primary, several variations in fact. I would never ever use my real name.” One responded that she did so both to protect her privacy and create a mental barrier (similar to that indicated by Sanders):

Yes, I do. This is for the sake of privacy. My real name is ethnic and therefore unique, and combined with knowledge of what state I’m from, people could find who I am and where I live with minimal effort. This is also for the sake of separating my work from my personal life. Names are largely personal, so having a separate one for sex work helps me mentally separate clients from friends.

Another’s response operated in accordance with Hochschild’s writing on sex work as “surface acting.”<sup>58</sup> He stated, “I use a pseudonym that sounds legitimate. And I DO adopt a persona . . . in a sense. It’s akin to an actor who’s playing the role of a prostitute.” A third, who identifies as a transgender male, cited using alternate gender performance as part of his manufactured persona: “Yes, as a sex worker, my persona is a Cisgender Female, with alternative name.” While there are many reasons to use a pseudonym, a unifying thread that runs through these responses is the desire to protect an authentic digital identity.

Bennett describes a panopticon effect on SNS users: “Data subjects’ might not be monitored at any one time, but they would be well advised to behave as if they were.”<sup>59</sup> In response to this form of surveillance, sex workers implement a strategy of identity management as they move between digital publics. I asked the participants about the words and language (e.g. name, job title, mention of sex work) that they use to describe themselves on personal networking sites and the sites they use to discuss sex work. Seven participants stated directly that they use all or part of their legal name on personal

networking sites, such as Facebook, and only two responded that they use a pseudonym on these sites. Conversely, twelve participants reported that they use a pseudonym or handle on sites that they use to discuss sex work, such as FetLife, and only one responded that he uses his real name. In this way, sex workers' manufactured identities translate directly into digital publics through their use of naming conventions. One participant clarified, "My social orientation is straight, so I function in my personal world in that context ... I keep my work strictly out of the public spotlight. (I live in the bible belt. Gay sex and prostitution are 2 of the biggest cultural taboos) Among a close circle of trusted friends, I'm pretty open and comfortable with direct references to what I do." His response suggests that it is not only the corporations or law enforcement that monitor his behavior, but other members of the digital publics who live in his local community.

The participants' digital identities are further cemented through the language used to talk about their profession on different sites. When discussing their work on sites such as Facebook, many participants emphasized that they refer only to the legal forms, such as pro-domme work (i.e. being paid to assume the dominant role in BDSM play), or else use coded language, such as "escort," "sexual healer," "spiritual healing," "bodywork," "massage," etc. to define their labor. Two participants clearly articulated the distinction between publics. One indicated that she uses a legal name and a "vanilla" job title on Facebook, but a pseudonym on FetLife, the site on which she references sex work in her writing and groups. Another noted, "I use my legal name on Facebook and Pinterest and my common scene name on Fetlife. My personal Fetlife account references and links to my sex work account. My sex work name includes my scene name, so that perspective clients [sic] can vet me in the community," and further clarified that, on the sites they use to discuss sex work, "I use a pseudonym. I refer to myself directly as a Domme and fetish model and am careful to use language that's legal." Although a counterpublic like FetLife is a safer space for sex workers to discuss their labor than a normative public like Facebook, it still operates in accordance with US legislation, and members must be careful to use language that falls within the legal limits.

In describing the digital personae created by user data, Lyon claims, "the data doubles, created as they are from coded categories, are not innocent or innocuous virtual fictions. As they circulate, they serve to open and close doors of opportunity and access."<sup>60</sup> The participants in this study create multiple data doubles across different SNS platforms. In doing so, they gain access to the opportunities offered by normative publics like Facebook (e.g. connections to friends and family, networks to disseminate information, etc.) as well as those offered by counterpublics such as FetLife (e.g. communication with other sex workers and those in the kink community). In addition to using linguistic and rhetorical strategies to keep these identities separate, participants also indicate a variety of technological methods.

## Surveillance, Privacy, and Cyber Security

Surveillance is inherent to web 2.0. Members of digital publics are constantly surrendering their data to corporations on a micro and macro level (what Clarke refers to as "dataveillance"), as well as to other members of the publics to which they belong (what Jansson et al. refer to as "interveillance").<sup>61</sup> Fuchs explains that as companies continue to profit from user data, the lines between these forms of surveillance continue to blur, and Cohen demonstrates that regulations that protect user privacy in online publics are often written to accommodate big data collection.<sup>62</sup> Thus, while many SNS platforms will provide users with privacy settings, which allow members to influence which and how much data is displayed within the public (providing protection on the level of interveillance), the site itself still controls access to the user's data (further supporting the tendency toward dataveillance). In addition to these overarching issues, sex workers face

the added threats of social stigma, online harassment, and law enforcement. For this vulnerable population, online privacy is a practical rather than theoretical concern. In discussing the options that websites do provide to opt out of targeted ads, Fuchs reminds us, “Not all users have excellent Internet usage skills, which is an aspect of digital inequality.”<sup>63</sup> This observation is reflected in the survey responses as participants indicated a spectrum of privacy practices that require varying levels of technological knowledge and skill to execute.

Fourteen participants responded that they take additional measures to protect their privacy online. Several of them indicated straightforward “cyber hygiene” tactics that require conscious attention but little technological knowledge. Three participants noted that they “avoid crossing photos between identities.” One participant specifically stated that she does not show her face in the pictures that she uses for sex work and does not use these photos elsewhere. This tactic only requires members of digital publics to remember which photos they have uploaded to each public. Another took photo security a step further, blending the digital with the material. She stated that she scrubs EXIF data off all photos before posting them on SNS platforms and uses “costumes, wigs, and makeup” in the photos she uses for sex work. This participant and one other referenced geographical location, claiming that they are careful to avoid providing any information that could reveal where and with whom they live when engaging in online sex work. Because sites like FetLife do not require members to input their location, this procedure is easily executable. One participant additionally remarked, “Deleting emails regularly, leaving the inbox and trash as clean as a whistle.” Although some sites save messages exchanged between members as a form of dataveillance, this provision would help this individual avoid accidental detection on the level of interveillance. Such precautions show an awareness of many of the most common digital threats.

Participants also reported using technologies that require a basic level of knowledge or skill. One participant responded that they use “incognito mode” to communicate with clients and avoid linking their Facebook and Google accounts to their work email and persona. While this prevents information regarding a user’s browsing history, cookies, and logins from being stored, it does not provide full protection from dataveillance as the user may still be visible to websites that they visit, institutions that provide them access, and internet service providers. Five participants marked that they use a different or virtual phone number, and four stated that they used a different or unlinked email. Tools such as these are free and readily available to the public. For instance, Google Voice allows users to acquire a free phone number from any available US city; however, its program policy does state, “Do not use Google Voice to engage in or promote illegal activities.”<sup>64</sup> Though users gain an added layer of privacy, they do so by taking on an added element of risk in breaking the law, violating the site’s Terms of Service, and making themselves more available to Google’s databases. One participant takes these technologies a step further and uses a “burner phone,” thereby acknowledging the importance of using secure hardware as well as secure software.

In addition to these fairly straightforward methods, other more powerful tools are used with a fair amount of frequency. Six participants indicated that they used a VPN, or Virtual Private Network. These tools enable users to send data across public networks, through other computers called “proxies,” without connecting it to their IP addresses. An EFF whitepaper notes that police typically trace IP addresses as a way to solve crimes, often at a great risk to the subject’s privacy.<sup>65</sup> However, privacy tools that prevent this require money and technical skill to implement. One user participant stated that her husband reroutes their browsing, and further clarified that she did not understand this process. Their response indicates that some digital privacy methods, especially those that protect

users against dataveillance, may be inaccessible to users without computational knowledge, and underscores the importance of having a support network in these instances. Participants indicated other cyber security tactics that intervene on the level of dataveillance; however, these were used with somewhat less frequency than or in accordance with a VPN. One participant who uses a VPN also noted using, “IP anonymizers, proxies, firewalls, airgap measures,” but did not explain these tactics further. Another VPN user stated, “I’m just beginning to experiment with crypto currency paymebts [sic].” Such measures would protect the user from unwanted intruders accessing their computer and from alerting companies, such as PayPal, and law enforcement to suspicious payments respectively. One participant, who does not use a VPN, reported that they use TOR, a secure browser, and TAILS, an anonymous OS that can be launched from a USB stick or DVD from almost any computer. Again, such practices protect the user from both intrusion and detection, but require a higher level of computational knowledge and skill.

Citing Stalder, Bennett claims, “Privacy is not the ‘antidote to surveillance’ nor was it ever meant to be.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, for the computer user, perfect privacy is an ever-receding horizon. For vulnerable populations like online sex workers, however, surveillance is not an abstract concern, but a real threat to one’s livelihood, and privacy not a theoretical aim, but a practical necessity. For the participants in this study, privacy begins in public. These individuals consciously discern between digitally networked publics and counterpublics as places where they can and cannot discuss their labor. They then use naming conventions and rhetorical strategies to manufacture and maintain separate identities within each public. In order to further protect themselves from dataveillance and interveillance, they use a variety of cyber security tactics that require varying levels of technological knowledge and skill to implement. Privacy is not an act that happens once but a process that these individuals must repeatedly perform.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have extended the scholarship on digitally networked publics to account for normative publics and counterpublics. I have claimed that Facebook operates as a normative public and FetLife as a counterpublic due to their approaches to data collection and implementation of US legislation regarding sex work within their site policies. Building on previous research regarding online sex work, I have offered a new study that considers the ways in which online sex workers use site selection, self presentation, cyber security, and cyber hygiene to establish and maintain manufactured identities within these publics as a means of combatting the surveillance inherent to web 2.0.

An obvious limitation to this study is the sample size. Generalizations about a population cannot be made from a sample of twenty-five participants. Using a larger sample, future research should consider the roles that the identity categories of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation play in online sex workers’ approach to privacy. Additional lines of inquiry might also address how surveillance capitalism benefits from this specific population, the ways in which anti-sex work legislation and policy adapt to sex workers’ privacy practices as well as the political implications of examining vulnerable populations within academic studies. By examining the privacy practices of those for whom surveillance is an immediate threat, we can develop a security model that is applicable more broadly to all members of digital publics.

## Notes

1. Alice Marwick and danah boyd, “I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience,” *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1

2. Christopher W. Blackwell and Sophia F. Dziegielewski, "Risk for a Price: Sexual Activity Solicitations in Online Male Sex Worker Profiles," *Journal of Social Service Research* 39, no. 2 (2013): 159, doi:10.1080/01488376.2012.744617; Jesse Drucker and Tanya Nieri, "Female Online Sex Workers' Perceptions of Exit from Sex Work," *Deviant Behavior* (2016): 1, doi:10.1080/01639625.2016.1257890. 
3. Niels Brügger, "A Brief History of Facebook as a Media Text: The Development of an Empty Structure," *First Monday* 20, no. 5 (2015), doi:10.5210/fm.v20i5.5423. 
4. Facebook, Inc., Facebook, 2018, Accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/>. 
5. José Van Dijck, "'You Have One Identity': Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn," *Media, Culture & Society* 35, no. 2 (2013): 200, doi:10.1177/0163443712468605. 
6. Christian Fuchs, "New Media, Web 2.0 and Surveillance," *Sociology Compass* 5, no. 2 (2011): 138–41, doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00354.x. 
7. Damien Fay, Hamed Haddadi, Michael C. Seto, Han Wang, and Christoph Kling, "An Exploration of Fetish Social Networks and Communities," *Advances in Network Science, Lecture Notes in Computer Science* (New York: Springer, 2016), 198, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-28361-6\_17. 
8. BitLove, Inc., FetLife, 2018, Accessed November 26, 2018, <https://fetlife.com/>. 
9. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 67. 
10. danah boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications," in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York: Routledge, 2010), 42. 
11. Marwick and boyd, 122–123. 
12. Van Dijck, "You Have One" 200. 
13. Warner, *Publics*, 63. 
14. Warner, *Publics*, 112–113. 
15. André Jansson, Mia Lövheim, Susanna Paasonen, and Johanna Sumiala, "Social Media: Implications for Everyday Life, Politics and Human Agency," *Approaching Religion* 3, no. 2 (2013): 29, doi:10.30664/ar.67514. 
16. Shoshana Zuboff, "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization," *Journal of Information Technology* 30, no. 1 (2015): 75–89, doi:10.1057/jit.2015.5. 
17. Fuchs, "New Media," 138. 
18. BitLove, Inc., FetLife. 
19. BitLove, Inc., FetLife. 
20. Alexandra Lutnick and Deborah Cohan, "Criminalization, Legalization Or Decriminalization of Sex Work: What Female Sex Workers Say in San Francisco, USA," *Reproductive Health Matters* 17, no. 34 (2009): 38; *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Prostitution." 
21. Jacqueline Comte, "Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research," *Sexuality & Culture* 18, no. 1 (2013): 202, doi:10.1007/s12119-013-9174-5; Kamala Kempadoo, Jyoti Sanghera, and Bandana Pattanaik, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2012): 151. 
22. The United States Department of Justice, "Model State Provisions on Pimping, Pandering, and Prostitution," The United States Department of Justice, 2014, <https://www.justice.gov/olp/model-state-provisions-pimping-pandering-and-prostitution>

accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/olp/model-state-provisions-pimping-pandering-and-prostitution>. 

23. Alexandra Murphy and Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, "Vice Careers: The Changing Contours of Sex Work in New York City," *Qualitative Sociology* 29 (2006): 137. 
24. Elliot Harmon, "How Congress Censored the Internet," Electronic Frontier Foundation, March 24, 2018, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2018/03/how-congress-censored-internet>. 
25. Emily Witt, "After the Closure of Backpage, Increasingly Vulnerable Sex Workers Are Demanding Their Rights," *The New Yorker*, June 10, 2018, Accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/after-the-closure-of-backpage-increasingly-vulnerable-sex-workers-are-demanding-their-rights>. 
26. Facebook, Inc., Facebook. 
27. BitLove, Inc., FetLife. 
28. Alison Bass, *Getting Screwed: Sex Workers and the Law* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, An imprint of University Press of New England, 2015): 45; Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 69; Angela Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," *Sociology Compass* 9, no. 7 (2015): 560, doi:10.1111/soc4.12282. 
29. Drucker and Nieri, "Female Online," 1. 
30. Cecilie Høigård and Liv Finstad, *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money, and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992): 183–184; Carole S. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora, 1992). 
31. Jacqueline Comte, "Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research," *Sexuality & Culture* 18, no. 1 (2013): 197–199, doi: 10.1007/s12119-013-9174-5; Ronald Weitzer, "New Directions in Research on Prostitution," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 43, no. 4–5 (2005): 213, doi:10.1007/s10611-005-1735-6. 
32. Kevin Walby, *Touching Encounters: Sex, Work, and Male-for-male Internet Escorting* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2012). 
33. Drucker and Nieri, "Female Online," 1. 
34. Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," 560. 
35. Bass, *Getting Screwed*, 45; Drucker and Nieri, "Female Online," 1. 
36. Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," 560. 
37. Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," 560; Tammy Castle and Jenifer Lee, "Ordering Sex in Cyberspace: A Content Analysis of Escort Websites," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (2008), doi:10.1177/1367877907086395; Scott Cunningham and Todd D. Kendall, "Prostitution 2.0: The Changing Face of Sex Work," *Journal of Urban Economics* 69, no. 3 (2011); Thomas J. Holt and Kristie R. Blevins, "Examining Sex Work from the Clients Perspective: Assessing Johns Using On-line Data," *Deviant Behavior* 28, no. 4 (2007), doi:10.1080/01639620701233282; Matthew V. Pruitt, "Online Boys: Male-for-Male Internet Escorts." *Sociological Focus* 38, no. 3 (2005), doi:10.1080/00380237.2005.10571265; Quinn, James F., and Craig J. Forsyth. "Describing Sexual Behavior in the Era of the Internet: A Typology for Empirical Research." *Deviant Behavior* 26, no. 3 (2005), doi:10.1080/01639620590888285; Weitzer, "New Directions." 
38. Holt and Blevins, "Examining Sex Work," 343–344. 
39. Blackwell and Dziegielewski, "Risk for a Price"; Andrew McLean, "New Realm, New Problems? Issues and Support Networks in Online Male Sex Work," *Gay & Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 8, no. 2 (2012): 70–81; Pruitt, "Online Boys." 
40. Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," 565. 

41. Bass, *Getting Screwed*, 55; Castle and Lee, "Ordering Sex," 108; Drucker and Nieri, "Female Online," 2; Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," 561; Weitzer, "New Directions," 216. 
42. Blackwell and Dziegielewski, "Risk for a Price," 160; Cunningham and Kendal, "Prostitution 2.0," 276. 
43. McLean, "New Realm," 76. 
44. Angela Jones, "'I Get Paid to Have Orgasms': Adult Webcam Models' Negotiation of Pleasure and Danger," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 240–243, doi:10.1086/686758. 
45. Bass, *Getting Screwed*, 53, 58–59. 
46. Bass, *Getting Screwed*, 44, 56. 
47. McLean, "New Realm," 71; Teela Sanders, "Its Just Acting: Sex Workers Strategies for Capitalizing on Sexuality," *Gender, Work and Organization* 12, no. 4 (2005): 319–42, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00276.x. 
48. Jones, "Sex Work in a Digital Era," 564. 
49. Matt Brim and Amin Ghaziani, "Introduction: Queer Methods." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3–4 (2016): 16, doi:10.1353/wsq.2016.0033. 
50. Caroline Dadas, "Messy Methods: Queer Methodological Approaches to Researching Social Media," *Computers and Composition* 40 (2016): 60–72, doi:10.1016/j.compcom.2016.03.007. 
51. Angela Jones, "Pornographics as Queer Method," in *Other, Please Specify: Queer Methods in Sociology*, ed. DLane R. Compton, Tey Meadow, and Kristen Schilt (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 104. 
52. Suzanne Jenkins, "New Technologies, New Territories: Using the Internet to Connect with Sex Workers and Sex Industry Organizers," in *New Sociologies of Sex Work*, ed. Kate Hardy, Sarah Kingston, and Teela Sanders (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 92. 
53. McLean, "New Realm," 72. 
54. Jansson et al., "Social Media," 30. 
55. Christian Fuchs, "Social Software and Web 2.0: Their Sociological Foundations and Implications," in *Handbook of Research on Web 2.0, 3.0, and X.0: Technologies, Business, and Social Applications*, ed. San Murugesan and San Murugesan (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2010), 764–89. 
56. Colin J. Bennett, "In Defense of Privacy: The Concept and the Regime," *Surveillance & Society* 8, no. 4 (2011): 490, doi:10.24908/ss.v8i4.4184. 
57. McLean, "New Realms," 72; Sanders, "Its Just Acting," 323. 
58. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). 
59. Bennett, "In Defense," 492. 
60. David Lyon, *Surveillance and Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Digital Discrimination* (Routledge, 2003), 27. 
61. Roger Clarke, "Dataveillance: Delivering '1984,'" in *Framing Technology: Society, Choice, and Change*, ed. Lelia Green and Roger Guinerry, 117–30 (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1994); Jansson et al., "Social Media," 34. 
62. Julie E. Cohen, *Configuring the Networked Self: Law, Code, and the Play of Everyday Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 10; Fuchs, "New Media, Web 2.0 and Surveillance," 138. 
63. Fuchs, "New Media, Web 2.0 and Surveillance," 142. 

64. Google LLC, "Google Voice Acceptable Use Policy," Google Voice, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.google.com/intl/en-US/googlevoice/program-policies.html>. 
65. Aaron Mackey, "Unreliable Informants: IP Addresses, Digital Tips and Police Raids," Electronic Frontier Foundation, May 16, 2017, 7-8, <http://www.eff.org/wp/unreliable-informants-ip-addresses-digital-tips-and-police-raids>. 
66. Bennett, "In Defense," 493. 

 [Bio](#)

**S. L. Nelson**

S.L. Nelson studies rhetoric and composition at the University of Pittsburgh. Their research examines the slippage and play that occurs within the rhetoric of computational structures. Working through queer theoretical and methodological frameworks, they consider the ways in which computer users can critique, resist, and subvert the normative narratives perpetuated by digital systems.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

AK Thompson, "When Shock is No Longer Shocking: The Role of Seduction in Revitalizing Benjamin's Dialectical Image Under Late-Capitalist Conditions," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.5>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## When Shock is No Longer Shocking: The Role of Seduction in Revitalizing Benjamin's Dialectical Image Under Late-Capitalist Conditions

AK Thompson

**ABSTRACT** Walter Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image provided a strong foundation for the development of political art during the first half of the twentieth century. However, with the rise of late capitalism and its attendant reorganization of our experience of shock, culture, and history itself, the concept must be reevaluated. This is so not least because, whereas Benjamin operated on the presumption that shock had a kind of self-evident revelatory power, we now occupy a field in which shock is no longer shocking. Through a reconsideration of the contributions made by artists Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman, I show how Benjamin's concept might be saved by strategies of epistemological seduction that operate, not as substitutes for shock, but as a concrete strategy for revitalizing our capacity to experience it.

### |

The political moment in which we find ourselves is marked by danger. The rise of far-Right and straight-up Nazi movements around the world (not to mention the ascent of populist nationalists to elected positions in numerous countries, including the United States) demands a return to those modes of decisive reckoning that became unfashionable during the years when intellectuals and savvy cultural producers proudly called themselves "postmodern." This is easier said than done, however, since it's harder to extract oneself from a situation than it is to stumble into it. In light of this difficulty, the observations that follow oscillate between sweeping overview and tentative prescription. For even as our moment demands agenda-setting initiatives to confront the hegemonic bids of xenophobes and bigots, these initiatives must begin by working through the impasse that arises from the postmodern deterioration of our collective capacity to experience shock.

Coinciding with the advent of fascism in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin began devising a mode of materialist analysis and action that foregrounded the promise he associated with those images he called dialectical. These images were significant, Benjamin felt, for their capacity to shock viewers into recognizing their historic responsibilities and, consequently, for depositing them before the decision demanded by politics. In this way, and far from being its representational refraction, the image presaged an unmediated encounter with the world and a "leap in the open air of history."<sup>1</sup>

Although Benjamin sometimes seemed hard pressed to provide concrete examples of such images,<sup>2</sup> I have argued elsewhere that compelling visual approximations can be found among the popular monumental artworks that arose in response to fascist ascent during the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Diego Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* (1933) and Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) disclosed strong correspondences with Benjaminian themes including the relationship of fragment to whole and the decision befalling the viewer in a flash of shocking realization. To be sure, these images did not produce the cessation of

happening that Benjamin had hoped for. Nevertheless, they remain useful models when considering how Benjamin's concept might be operationalized.



Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads / Man, Controller of the Universe* (1933 / 1934)

Since Benjamin's final essay on the concept of history and his subsequent suicide on the French-Spanish border, both the dialectical image and its enigmatic implications have yielded a vast secondary literature—most of which, as Benjamin biographer and friend Pierre Missac once noted, succumbed to “unsatisfying” and even “absurd” modes of commentary.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the limitations of this literature might be, however, the fundamental question remains: what is its value—or, indeed, the value of its most prized concept, the dialectical image—today?<sup>5</sup> What can a concept, which presumed that shock had self-evident revelatory power, contribute to the struggle against fascism at a time in which shock is no longer shocking?

I would like to make some suggestions regarding how Benjamin's concept might be refurbished to address dynamics he could not easily have anticipated. These dynamics are primarily epistemological and are best understood in relation to what Fredric Jameson once called “the cultural logic of late capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> Because we are now habituated to these dynamics, they strike us (if they strike us at all) as being for the most part unremarkable. Consequently, it has become difficult to evaluate the significance of the transformations they signaled, or to remain cognizant of the degree to which (for instance) they enabled Trump's ascent.<sup>7</sup> In order to proceed, it's therefore useful to return to postmodernism's primal scene to become reacquainted with its epistemological dimensions. Further, by reevaluating the visual strategies that arose in response to that scene, we can determine how they might be of use when working to refurbish the dialectical image to address the political dangers we now confront.

Despite working in different mediums and proceeding in antithetical ways, I argue that Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman can serve as useful reference points in this regard. I focus on these artists specifically because of their canonical status and because they are likely to be familiar even to those who did not live through the period in question or who opted to remain indifferent to the problems of visual culture. Specifically, I argue that Lombardi and Sherman's work suggests how *seduction* might serve not as a substitute for shock, but as a concrete strategy for revitalizing our capacity to experience it under late-capitalist conditions.<sup>8</sup>

However, while Lombardi and Sherman provide useful clues for determining how we might move beyond our present impasse (in which the capacity for decisive action has been muted by the conceits of a postmodern epistemology that aestheticizes shock and diminishes its revelatory power), evaluating their output from the standpoint of Benjamin's concept can't help but reveal certain inadequacies. Nevertheless, by considering their work in tandem and imagining what it might yield in synthesis, it is possible to envision how these inadequacies might be surmounted. It's on the basis of

such a synthesis, I argue, that the program for a new political art of the kind called for by Jameson might be developed.<sup>9</sup>

And it is toward this aim (and in opposition to the ominous shadows cast by the unendurable present) that we must now proceed. To begin, I review Benjamin and Jameson's overlapping but distinct analyses of images and shock to show how they might orient us to the challenges we confront. From this foundation, I analyze the work of Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman to reveal their common engagement with seduction. After cataloguing the strengths and weaknesses of these contributions, I conclude by proposing how their insights might be synthesized in the interest of revitalizing Benjamin's dialectical image under late-capitalist conditions. Although the practice-based implications of these findings remain to be determined, the effort is justified by the likelihood that, as Benjamin once put it, they will "improve our position in the struggle against fascism."<sup>10</sup>

## II

According to Benjamin, history decayed into images.<sup>11</sup> From this insight, he developed a theory and strategy for alerting readers to both the promise and the perils that marked their moment. Gathered together in "Convolute N" of *The Arcades Project* and finding their most desperate expression in his famous essay on the concept of history, Benjamin's explorations of the dialectical image remain both enigmatic and highly suggestive when imagining how movement actors might take hold of the visual field today. For Benjamin, dialectical images arose where social relations began to crystallize around their point of greatest tension. "To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts," he proposed in one entry filed in "Convolute N."

Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions  
—there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of  
thought. Its position is naturally not an arbitrary one. It is to be found, in a word,  
where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest.<sup>12</sup>

Along with the young Marx, who noted in a letter to Arnold Ruge that "the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality,"<sup>13</sup> Benjamin thought that—by revealing how people's wish for happiness (and, at its threshold, for absolution) inevitably reached an impasse within capitalism's material culture—desire's persistence could be made to alert us to the revolutionary promise laying dormant in *every* situation.<sup>14</sup> And, once it became clear that identification with the existing world corresponded more to its unrealized promise than to its manifest form, Benjamin imagined that people might embrace modes of action that, to his mind, were equivalent to "splitting the atom."<sup>15</sup> When coupled with the profane reckoning provoked by the dialectical image (a reckoning that enjoined the viewer to consider how—*this time, and concretely*—their dreams of happiness might finally be fulfilled), Benjamin envisioned that the explosive energy unleashed when desire was decoupled from the inadequacy of its posited resolution might become revolution's driving force.

In contrast to the ambivalence of the wish image, which tended to refract its profane promise through the analytic distortions of the dream state, Benjamin held the dialectical image to be inseparable from the recognition of the revolutionary possibility inherent in the time of "the now" through which it emerged. Commenting on the distinct but interrelated character of these two image forms in her classic exegetical treatment of his work, Buck-Morss proposed that, with the dialectical image, wish images were "negated, surpassed, and at the same time dialectically redeemed."<sup>16</sup> Here, the dialectical image provides a means of "completing" the wish image's dream of liberation by exposing it to

the shock of recognition—by making both the *promise* and the *means* by which it might be achieved visible all at once.

By acceding to the demand the dialectical image brought in its wake, Benjamin imagined that people might come face to face with “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”<sup>17</sup> For this reason (and as early as his 1929 essay on surrealism), he proposed that revolution meant discovering “in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images.”<sup>18</sup> Only from within this sphere was it possible to address history, “the world of universal . . . actualities,” directly.<sup>19</sup>

Analyzing Benjamin’s work, Buck-Morss observed that the dialectical image was composed of two discrete but interrelated moments—one mediated and analytic, and one immediate and revelatory. Further, she proposed that, “as an immediate, quasi-mystical apprehension, the dialectical image was intuitive [and prone for this reason to produce shocking realizations]. As a philosophical ‘construction,’ it was not.” Indeed,

Benjamin’s laborious and detailed study of past texts, his careful inventory of the fragmentary parts he gleaned from them, and the planned use of these in deliberately constructed “constellations” were all sober, self-reflective procedures, which, he believed, were necessary in order to make visible a picture of truth that the fictions of conventional history writing covered over.<sup>20</sup>

The practical and pedagogical implication here is that moments of shocking realization might be produced and not merely discovered. Owing to our current impasse and to the multiplication of catastrophes that mark our age, committing to such a construction and orienting toward the “picture of truth” it yields seems more urgent than ever.

Nevertheless, any effort to devise a dialectical image that neglects to consider the significant epistemological transformations that have taken place since the 1930s is bound to fail. It’s therefore necessary to transpose the epistemic premises underlying Benjamin’s conception into our contemporary, late-capitalist register. Practically speaking, this means coming to terms with the way that the unendurable present has altered our relationship to images and history—and to the experience of shock itself.

### III

In his pioneering analysis of the cultural logic of late capitalism, Fredric Jameson acknowledged that, despite evident connections between the postmodern sensibilities of the 1980s and those that sometimes found expression in the high-modernist period known to Benjamin, people at the end of the twentieth century had become separated from that era by a kind of epochal break. For Jameson, this break corresponded to the dramatic transformations that multinational capitalism produced in the relationship between culture and economy during the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> If, in the past, culture—and, in particular, visual culture—was at least formally distinguishable from the market (and if this position allowed cultural producers to formulate critical responses to dynamics arising from the economic base), the same could less easily be said by the time Jameson’s text appeared.

The problem was compounded by the fact that, in addition to culture’s economic subsumption, late capitalism prompted a transposition that led history to find expression through the register of *style*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, for Jameson, postmodernism was inseparable from its “imitation of dead styles.”<sup>23</sup> At its threshold, this dynamic meant that the past itself was transformed, and that it came to take on the characteristics of a “stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness.’”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Jameson feared that the “retrospective dimension” required to guide “any vital reorientation of our collective future” seemed to be in danger of dissolving into a “multitudinous photographic

simulacrum.”<sup>25</sup> While Benjamin maintained that history decayed into images, Jameson alerted us to a new situation in which the two categories had become increasingly difficult to distinguish.

Written though it was at the height of our collective preoccupation with postmodern themes and implications, Jameson’s assessment is now more relevant than ever. Between the vortex of meme culture, the perils of “fake news” (both real and imagined), and the far Right’s uncanny ability to repurpose even the rainbow flag (a sign whose fixity seemed unassailable), it may even seem that we are now *more* postmodern than ever.<sup>26</sup>

How, then, should we orient to this scene? One might begin by striving to recapture the euphoric deconstructive chaos that marked postmodernism’s ascent—but here we must be cautious, since (as Jameson noted) the movement’s anti-systemic excesses were often encouraged by a market desperate to revitalize the waning magic of the commodity form. Acknowledging the spirit of refusal that sometimes found expression in postmodern culture, Jameson was nevertheless forced to conclude that the genre’s “own offensive features—from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance, which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism—no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society.”<sup>27</sup>

Corroborating this perspective a decade later, art critic Hal Foster went so far as to suggest that the critical artist working under postmodern conditions tended to become as much a “subcontractor” to the despised system as they ever were its “antagonist.”<sup>28</sup> Thus it was that, in a brave new world partitioned into niche markets, defiance became a hot commodity while irony and kitsch became preferred compensations for the waning use value of commodities. Rehearsing these arguments here can’t help but alert us to the degree to which, like postmodernism itself, they too have become banal. Still, and despite our habituation, both the dynamics and their consequences have grown increasingly acute. It suffices to recall Milo Yiannopoulos’ boastful proclamation that being pro-Trump was “the new punk” to realize the extent to which this is the case.

## IV

Although Benjamin had anticipated the subsumption of culture to the commodity form, he only witnessed the process in its germinal—high modernist—phase.<sup>29</sup> Now that the process is complete (or nearly complete), it’s evident that one of the central premises upon which the dialectical image relies has become less stable. If, in “Convolute N,” Benjamin stated that his goal was to uncover “the expression of the economy in its culture,”<sup>30</sup> the challenge today is reading the “expression” of one sphere in another when the distinction between them has become—at best—purely formal.

Responding to this unprecedented indistinction, Jameson concluded that ideas derived from “Benjamin’s account” were now “both singularly relevant and singularly antiquated.”<sup>31</sup> In order to address the challenges associated with this new terrain (challenges which have only grown more acute since *Postmodernism* first appeared), Jameson sought to devise a “cognitive map” suitable to a world whose coordinates had become distorted by late capitalism’s contractions of space-time. Homologous in some respects to Benjamin’s dialectical image, the cognitive map Jameson sought to devise was meant to yield “a situational representation [of] that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is . . . society’s structures as a whole.”<sup>32</sup>

Confronted with the task of representing the “properly unrepresentable” totality, Jameson noted that the cultural products of the postmodern era—though often assembled through pastiche, and frequently devolving into apologias for global exploitation—could also be read as “particular new forms of realism.”<sup>33</sup> From this vantage, the critical task involved determining how to map “a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.”<sup>34</sup> Although the cultural logic of late capitalism made it seem impossible to access the signified directly, Jameson wagered that its *dimensions*—its spatial and temporal coordinates, its mass and density—might still be read off of its signifying trace.

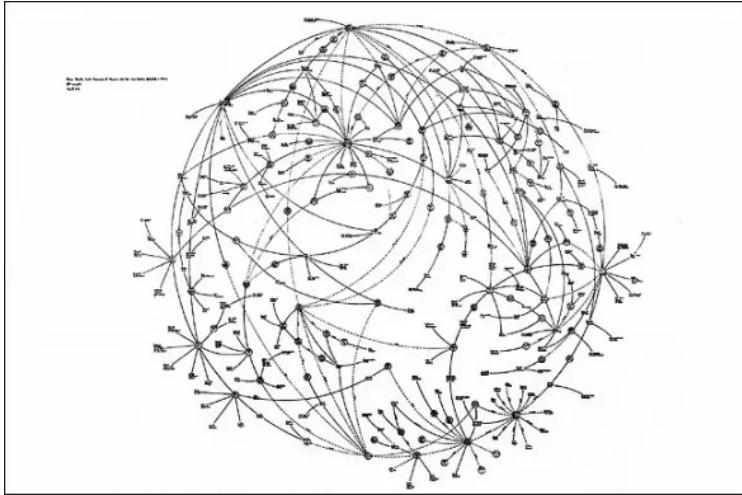
In practical terms, the collapse of the distinction between culture and economy enjoins us to elaborate epistemic habits and visual strategies that do not rely—as all previous avant-gardes have done—on the critical distance afforded by their prior separation. Since, as Jameson noted, it’s impossible to “return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours,” we must find ways of updating (completing) our high-modernist strategies by tempering them in the crucible of cultural indistinction.<sup>35</sup>

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson never got much further than calling for such a project. Instead of concrete propositions, he provided a series of useful but vague guidelines: “the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital.” But while he remained short on specifics, Jameson had no doubts regarding the project’s urgency. Indeed, since—in his view—an art of this kind would allow us to “grasp our positioning … and regain a capacity to act and struggle” in a context hitherto marked by “confusion,” the stakes were very high.<sup>36</sup> The same remains true (has become more pressing still) today.

How, then, might the dialectical image be transformed to address the cultural logic of late capitalism? How can Benjamin’s concept—which emphasized shock as though it had self-evident revelatory power—be reconfigured to work at a moment in which shock is no longer shocking? I propose that the dialectical image might be salvaged by supplementing its shock with an aesthetic-epistemological *seduction* capable of reconnecting viewers to the now-lost referent. In order to reveal how such a seduction might practically be achieved, it is now time to consider the work of Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman. Despite their obvious differences, these two artists played a central role in devising strategies and motifs for addressing the postmodern condition. Moreover, in struggling with its epistemic demands, they produced images that echoed aspects of Benjamin’s conception while simultaneously enlisting seduction to address the historical lacunae we now confront. By returning to postmodernism’s primal scene, I propose that we might find a point from which to trace a line of flight beyond our current impasse.

## V

Like Benjamin, neo-conceptual artist Mark Lombardi was preoccupied with collecting and organizing information in the interest of illuminating revelation. Between 1994 and his death by suicide in 2000, he also developed a novel representational strategy that suggested an intriguing visual approximation of Jameson’s cognitive map. After a career that saw him shuffle between stints as a reference librarian, a curator, and a researcher, Lombardi began producing works in which data collection and the analysis of social relations congealed into “narrative structures.”<sup>37</sup> Taking financial scandals, business deals, and shady connections between corporate and political interests as his starting point, he devised “delicate filigree drawings that map … the flow of global capital.”<sup>38</sup>



Mark Lombardi, *Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama, and the Iran-Contra Operation, ca. 1984-86 (4th Version)* (1999)

In an artist statement from 1997, Lombardi described how he assembled these narrative structures by using “a network of lines and notations . . . meant to convey a story, typically about a recent event . . . like the collapse of a large international bank, trading company, or investment house.”<sup>39</sup> Motivated by the desire to “explore the interaction of political, social and economic forces in contemporary affairs,” his approach was strongly reminiscent of Benjamin’s efforts to “assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components.”<sup>40</sup> “Working from syndicated news items and other published accounts,” said Lombardi, “I begin each drawing by compiling large amounts of information about a specific bank, financial group or set of individuals.”

After a careful review of the literature I then condense the essential points into an assortment of notations and other brief statements of fact, out of which an image begins to emerge. My purpose throughout is to interpret the material by juxtaposing and assembling the notations into a unified, coherent whole. . . . Hierarchical relationships, the flow of money and other key details are then indicated by a system of radiating arrows, broken lines and so forth. . . . Every statement of fact and connection depicted in the work is true and based on information culled entirely from the public record.<sup>41</sup>

Like Benjamin, Lombardi strove to make the scattered fragments of daily life intelligible. After his death, his holdings were found to include “14,500 index cards with information on the subjects of his investigations, all drawn from publicly available sources.”<sup>42</sup> This compulsive collecting neatly echoed Benjamin’s own habits while struggling to illuminate the nineteenth century through the Paris arcades. And so, while there are many intriguing biographical connections between Lombardi and Benjamin (connections that culminate in their respective deaths by suicide), it’s clear that their *methodological* connection is still greater.

To give but one example: in his unpublished manuscript addressing the history of panoramic painting (a subject to which Benjamin devoted a section of his “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”), Lombardi remarked upon how, in struggling to give an account of the world, “the historian is reduced to random glimmerings obtained via shards, scraps and bits of ephemera to begin the reconstruction.”<sup>43</sup> Although he did not cite Benjamin directly in this context, the sentiment clearly echoes Benjamin’s contention that, methodologically speaking, the arcades project’s goal was to make the “rags, the refuse” of everyday life “come into their own . . . by making use of them.”<sup>44</sup>

Given this confluence, it's not surprising that Lombardi curator Robert Hobbs tended to describe the artist's work in Benjaminian terms. According to art critic Eleanor Heartney, Hobbs was "immediately impressed" with the "sheer beauty" of Lombardi's work, which used "the delicacy of the curving lines" to delineate the "abstract force fields created by the global movement of money." By Heartney's account, Hobbs designated these works "variously as webs, rhizomes," and (notably) "constellations." But alongside such revealing designations (and this is decisive for understanding the work's importance for our purposes), Hobbs also declared that Lombardi's creations were nothing short of a "mental and visual seduction."<sup>45</sup>

Like Hobbs, cultural journalist Ryan Bigge was also taken by the conjunction of analytic clarity and seduction in Lombardi's work. Indeed, as far as Bigge was concerned, the artist's mastery of the curved line recalled nothing so much as the "simple yet seductive contours of latitude and longitude" even as they revealed the "vicious circles" of global capitalism itself.<sup>46</sup> Pitched somewhere between art appreciation and art criticism, comments like these should not be mistaken for an analysis of epistemic premises. Nevertheless, in their very formulation, one begins to detect the means by which seduction might return us to the shock of recognition.

## VI

For Bigge, Lombardi's genius owed to his ability to "make [the] abstract movements of capital concrete and comprehensible."<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the constructive principle upon which these narrative structures were based ensured that the image's comprehensibility was never instantaneous. Instead, it was achieved by oscillating between critical distance and engaged proximity. Seduced by the promise of discovering the work's meaning, the viewer is literally compelled to sway back and forth. As Bigge recounts it, "the density" of Lombardi's images required the viewer to "take a number of steps backward, since the facts can easily overwhelm the piece's beauty." Indeed, it was "only from a distance" that the work could be "seen, rather than read."<sup>48</sup> Still, density is seductive in its particularity; the viewer, now retreated to a point from which the whole is perceptible, is overtaken by the urge to dive back in.

Because its *particular* content remains indeterminate when contemplated from a distance that would allow the viewer to consider the beauty of the whole, Lombardi encouraged a process of analytic engagement that moved the viewer (now seduced) to fixate once again upon its constellated components. Like falling from heaven and breaking the cloud cover, the viewer is drawn *through* the aesthetic realm to confront the shocking implications of the depicted scene; however, even here, neither the beauty nor the conceptual coherence of the totality are eclipsed (since the viewer, overwhelmed, is compelled to step back and begin the process anew). By prompting this alternation in vantage points, Lombardi achieved through formal means an effect comparable to the one that stereoscopy achieves for vision and dialectics achieves for epistemology.

Along with their success in holding true to what Jameson called "the world space of multinational capital," Lombardi's images also coincide with Benjamin's premises for the dialectical image, where historical fragments are brought together in illuminating constellations. However, whereas Benjamin produced stereoscopy through the montage of the historical citations themselves,<sup>49</sup> Lombardi achieves this same effect through modulations in the epistemic position of the viewer—and it is through this process that seduction is activated.

Which is not to say that montage plays no role in Lombardi's oeuvre, though his works certainly do not amount to montage in the conventional sense. Drawn in pencil and on one surface, they stand in sharp contrast to those early twentieth-century works assembled

from multiple sources and aimed at yielding generative discord. Nevertheless, when considered from an *epistemological* and not a purely formal perspective, it's clear that Lombardi did bring discrete fragments into combination in illuminating ways.

Constellating lines trace social relationships between fragmented and discontinuous nodes and, in the process, forge a new socio-spatial proximity (a new cognitive map) giving form to the “world space of multinational capital.” If, in the past, montage enabled artists to illuminate the trans-local and trans-temporal dimensions of the social through the assemblage of discontinuous objects, Lombardi revitalized this strategy by conceptually distilling these objects to their most primitive formal notation.

As a result, and in contrast to the kind of shock yielded by montage during the early twentieth century,<sup>50</sup> Lombardi’s seduction revealed how the epistemic promise that Benjamin attributed to shock might be revitalized by subverting its contemporary aestheticization. By showing how capitalism’s trans-local organization becomes possible through concrete and localized points of relay, his work even suggests how we might begin to take history itself to be the object of a collective, redemptive labor process. For these reasons, and as an approximation of the new “political art” called for by Jameson, Lombardi’s work should be considered an important reference point for anyone hoping to produce dialectical images today. Still, when measured against the demands that Benjamin associated with his concept, it becomes clear that this work ultimately falls short.

To understand why, it’s necessary to consider how Lombardi’s narrative structures depict a world of objectified relations in which the viewer herself is never directly implicated. Because the composition’s constellated references do not *pass through* the viewer, they organize no implicated point from which to engage. As a result, even as Lombardi’s images provoke forms of *analytic reckoning* that are consistent with the dialectical image, they are not likely to yield the forms of *decisive action* that Benjamin also sought.

According to Hobbs, “Lombardi wanted . . . to pry people loose from habitual ways of thinking, so that they would look anew at their world and find far-ranging connections where none were thought to exist.”<sup>51</sup> And this undoubtedly happens; however, while Lombardi’s viewer can look on with amazement or gnawing disgust as the trans-local relations of capitalist exploitation take on a concrete form, the images themselves organize no space for engagement. Since the narrative recounted by Lombardi’s structures is already whole (since, unlike in Rivera’s *Man at the Crossroads*, there is in fact no contradiction to resolve), efforts to “complete” the scene through decisive action become superfluous.

At best, Lombardi’s representational strategy fosters outrage at capitalist impunity. At worst, it becomes a machine yielding smug satisfaction. For while his formal-conceptual objectifications make the world visible in its trans-local, constellated totality, the price of that objectification is that—like a weather pattern—the world itself begins to seem like a pre-social, reified form that might be contemplated from some untenable Archimedean point (and though the seduction might bring you close, you will never become implicated in the constellation itself). Standing outside the depicted scene, the viewer is implicitly exonerated. And since the viewer is extrinsic to the drama, the drama itself is doomed to remain a distorted representation of the social. For this reason (and along with Brecht, who made the same observation in a different but parallel context), we must insist: “the present-day world can only be described to present-day people if it’s described as capable of transformation.”<sup>52</sup>

How might the political-epistemological lacunae at the heart of Lombardi's work be addressed? In order to answer this question, it is useful to revisit the work of Cindy Sherman, an artist whose images are in some sense a perfect antithesis to Lombardi's neo-conceptualist experiments. Working in photographic self-portrait, Sherman gained notoriety for her uncanny ability to reveal the precise means by which narrative fictions come to organize perception. In so doing, she also illuminated important aspects of the social that would remain overlooked by Lombardi's global networks. Because Sherman was among those artists who—starting in the 1970s—began actively exploring embodiment and site-specificity, this corrective function should be understood as deliberate.

Indeed, as art historian Hannah Westley recounts, the “move to reground art” during the period in which Sherman’s work first appeared was considered “urgent” by artists confronting “the serial objects of minimalism, simulacral images of Pop and demonstrations of conceptual work” that had presaged Lombardi’s own constructions two decades later.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to Lombardi’s precursors, Sherman used her work to highlight how the postmodern subject came to be marked by what seemed like an irreconcilable conflict between representation as an all-consuming social-indexical system and those nebulous aspects of Being that refused encapsulation. It therefore followed that her work embraced the “return to the body and the social, to the abject and the site-specific” that marked the art of that era.<sup>54</sup>

In her *Untitled Film Stills*, shot between 1977 and 1980, Sherman produced self-portraits that—through changes in composition, costume, lighting, and tone—effectively demonstrated that “subjectivity” was primarily a representational accomplishment. By mining the archive of established film genres and personae while maintaining a consistent presence at the center of each image, she revealed the degree to which the cultural logic of late capitalism had subordinated the ontological question of Being to the more malleable register of style. Based on this premise, Sherman’s works *should* seem whimsical; however, viewers and critics alike have agreed that their actual effect has been far more unsettling. Why is this so?



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21* (1978)

When considered as a series so that both the range of Sherman’s deliberate filmic citations and her constant presence at the center of each image become explicit, the *Untitled Film Stills* begin to appear dialectical. By mobilizing representational norms unmoored by concrete referents while—at the same time—maintaining a consistent presence in each image, Sherman intensified the tension between simulacrum and self-portrait by actualizing both simultaneously (it is a montage, but one of superimposition).

In these images, two discrete ontological premises coexist but are never resolved. Occupying each image in a way that suggested a “more” (a beneath or beyond that exceeds representational capture), Sherman effectively staged a conflict between representation and Being.

According to art critic Peter Schjeldahl, by taking “the movie fiction of a character observed in vulnerable solitude as the departure point for an exploration, in depth, of vulnerability itself,” Sherman seduced viewers into confronting the “shock of deep recognition”—an experience that, for Schjeldahl, was “not altogether agreeable.” On this basis, he located “the drama” in Sherman’s work “in the abyss between matter and mind, object and subject.”<sup>55</sup> Initially imperceptible, this point—this “abyss”—is gradually revealed through the staged antagonism of antithetical ontological premises. Initially, representation subsumes (seems even to constitute) Being. But if this is true, then what is this unsettling *thing*, this remainder that escapes symbolization?

On first blush, the *Untitled Film Stills* accord with the feminist desire to interrogate the representational norms that organize and maintain feminine status. By citing works of low-culture and transposing them into the realm of fine art (as Duchamp and Warhol had done before her), Sherman exposed them to forms of scrutiny they may previously have escaped. But despite these formal, stylistic, and genre-specific citations, Sherman remained the clear subject-object of her work. By downplaying her status as creator while remaining a consistent (though consistently malleable) presence throughout, she discovered a means of turning the viewer’s encounter into one of “quasi-mystical apprehension.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, like Benjamin before her, Sherman confirmed that effective social criticism “needn’t say anything. Merely show.”<sup>57</sup>

But while the *Untitled Film Stills* were exceptionally compelling as a critique of representational norms, they did not yet constitute an explicit critique of representation as such. If, as art critic Norman Bryson once put it, postmodernism was characterized by the “absorption of reality within representation,” the challenge confronting those unwilling to remain trapped in the prison house of signs first involved uncovering the means by which representation had come to *seem* like an “apparently enclosed order” with “no fire escape.”<sup>58</sup> Only then does a jailbreak become conceivable. The *Untitled Film Stills* pointed to this challenge; however, they did not resolve it.

## VIII

It’s therefore not surprising that Sherman’s subsequent work became explicitly concerned with the point at which representation fails. In her centerfold images of the 1980s, this search led her (still the subject-object of her work) to depict women posed in accordance with the genre conventions of the pornographic pinup. Like the *Untitled Film Stills* before them, these works made representational norms their object of scrutiny. At the same time, however, Sherman gestured toward the unrepresentable by mobilizing a look of distracted focus, which suggested either an enormous inside or an enormous outside that stubbornly refused encapsulation within the image frame. What Sherman “sees” remains inaccessible to the viewer, who is forced to confront not only her own scopophilic prying but also the implications of that realm (in her, in me, in the work, in the world) that escapes symbolization.

By the mid-1980s, and as a logical extension of her previous experiments (and as a forerunner to the Whitney’s famous showcase of 1993), Sherman began exploring death and that zone of abjection marked by indistinction.<sup>59</sup> This work closely echoed themes elaborated by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. For Kristeva, the significance of abjection could be attributed to the fact that it “draws me toward that space were

meaning collapses.”<sup>60</sup> Moreover, like the seductions of Lombardi’s stereoscopy, Kristeva found that “the time of abjection is double” since it’s marked by a “veiled infinity” (an abyss, in Schjeldahl’s terms) even as it heralds “the moment when revelation bursts forth.”<sup>61</sup> Once again, the viewer succumbs to seduction’s sway.

Derived from and associated with Lacan’s account of the Real (that *thing* which escapes symbolization and thus produces unsettling effects), Kristeva’s abjection also shares an important conceptual homology with Benjamin’s dialectical image. Indeed, Benjamin was endlessly preoccupied with the moment when revelation “bursts forth” (it is the moment of “quasi-mystical apprehension,” of shock, to which Buck-Morss alerted us). As in Kristeva, this moment obtains when the “veiled infinity” of empty, homogenous time (the time of mythological histories told from the standpoint of “progress”) is sundered.<sup>62</sup> Consequently, for Benjamin, “the dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash” and that, through revelation and the decision it demands, makes the past citable in all its moments.<sup>63</sup>

It therefore followed that, for Benjamin, the desire for redemption was stimulated by recollections of an existence prior to the fall.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Kristeva proposed that the experience of abjection arises when the subject discovers “that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations for its own being.”<sup>65</sup> This is politically significant, since the unsettling experience of lack also forces us to consider the precise profane dimensions of the missing piece. At its logical conclusion, the experience of lack opens onto political decision, and to the possibility of committing to an act that might surmount the inaugural loss, which—through abjection—can now be perceived directly.

Rendered though they are in the language of theoretical abstraction, such connections allow us to begin appreciating the properly Benjaminian dimensions of Sherman’s work. While Benjamin highlighted the political significance of the corpse in the German “mourning plays” of the seventeenth century, Sherman’s images from the mid-‘80s revealed how the corpse could likewise be used to illuminate dynamics particular to late capitalism.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, her work from this period managed to see the corpse, not only from the outside, but also (as Benjamin had suggested with respect to Baudelaire) “from within.”<sup>67</sup>



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #153* (1985)

But while these Benjaminian associations suggest that, through her work, Sherman managed to combine scopophilic seduction with bludgeoning shock in pursuit of profane illumination, her images, like Lombardi's, remain ambivalent. This is because the viewer contemplating Sherman's abjection is confronted with the shock of recognition (of the remainder that draws us back to the scene of indistinction—but now we return with consciousness intact) only *after* passing through the seductions of abjection, the seductions of the car crash we can't (can't help but) look at through our fingers. Indeed, under postmodern conditions, the abject is encountered first and foremost as an aesthetic conceit, which would be fine, or even advantageous, if it weren't for the fact that Sherman's seduction is itself ambivalent.

On the one hand, it seems to prepare the viewer for a shock from which it's impossible to distance one's self. Here, as in Lombardi, seduction reveals itself to be an important factor in the elaboration of a contemporary dialectical image—though, through her engagement with the Real, Sherman surpasses Lombardi by implicating the viewer in the depicted scene. On the other hand, however, this same seduction has shown signs of being susceptible to an easy aestheticization, which renders the experience wholly commensurate with the cultural logic of late capitalism. Such aestheticization is incompatible with the dialectical image and its demands.<sup>68</sup>

To get a sense of how far we've fallen, it suffices to recall how for curator Magrit Brehm—and in keeping with postmodernism's fetishistic embrace of depthlessness and its allergy to what (following Jameson) we might think of as hermeneutic modes of social-intellectual engagement—the subject of Sherman's "Disgust" series was "not the moldy

food but the designed surface" itself.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in Brehm's account, disgust operates first and foremost as "an artistic experience."<sup>70</sup> Though always in danger of being undone by the Real, Brehm's comments reveal the extent to which postmodern epistemology is capable, through aestheticization, of representationally subsuming even abjection. And as irreducible Being is reduced to the stylistic conceits of the image surface, the ontological stereoscopy that gave Sherman's work its depth and dialectical force becomes flat; as a result, the image becomes decoupled from the historical anchor that would allow us to conceive it metonymically.

Perhaps it was inevitable. After all, even Kristeva noted that—with the publication of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (a Benjamin favorite)—abjection began to seem "fashionable."<sup>71</sup> Channeled into the symbolic just as capitalism began to rob experience of all gravity (and here we might recall Jameson's contention that postmodernism heralded the "waning of affect"<sup>72</sup>), abjection has paradoxically become a means of re-infusing depthless and undifferentiated lives with something resembling significance. At a moment when many commodities have been deprived of all but the *representation* of their past use values, the Real has become a hot commodity. And the more the encounter with the Real came to mark the last reliable verification of Being (and here we need only to recall those pornographic genres promising real tears, or those successful businesses specializing in slum tourism), the more likely it became that abject art would degenerate into a provocation whose ultimate effect is the reaffirmation of the status quo.<sup>73</sup>

## IX

Through their innovative uses of montage and the modulations in perspective they provoked, Lombardi and Sherman devised visual strategies that coincided with many of the analytic premises outlined by Benjamin in his consideration of the dialectical image. And while the representational strategies they deployed were in some senses antithetical, both artists used modes of visual seduction to reactivate shock's epistemological force while subverting its contemporary aestheticization. At the same time, their distinct (but similarly incomplete) conceptions of the social meant that neither Lombardi nor Sherman produced images that rose to the level of Benjamin's concept (a problem which, to be fair, Benjamin struggled to address as well). Still, we must ask: if Lombardi's narrative structures fell short by over-objectifying the social and imagining that it could be envisioned from some untenable Archimedean point, and if Sherman's self-portraits missed the mark by relinquishing abjection before connecting the corpse to the world from which it arose and to which it is related as a kind of metonymic encapsulation, is it possible that—through the synthesis of these artists' greatest insights—these shortcomings might be surmounted? Given the stakes of our present and the conditions under which we now operate, it is an experiment worth considering.

To prepare the ground for such a synthesis, it's useful to begin by recalling that, despite their differences, both Lombardi and Sherman made use of seduction to reactivate shock. Following their lead, we can therefore imagine that, today, the dialectical image must refuse to become visible all at once. If, as Buck-Morss proposed, such images were comprised of two discrete modes of engagement (with one related to its concrete and mediated production and the other to its quasi-mystical apprehension), the contemporary context demands that *the process of production become an aspect of what is finally recognizable*. Today, the dialectical image must be *processual* and marked by *duration*. Seduction initiates the process; the payoff is the shock. It is the shock of recognition, but it must still and forever be wrested from the dangerous likelihood of its aesthetic subsumption.

But while seduction can reactivate shock, it's clear that, in and of itself, seduction is not enough. The lacunae in Lombardi and Sherman's work enjoin us to find means of overcoming the limits of their respective visualizations of the social. This might be achieved either through the constellation of their respective strategies or by devising new representational approaches that combine their epistemic premises in some greater unity (saturated with tension though yet it may be).

## X

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson never got further than outlining a series of general guidelines for the development of a new political art capable of addressing the epistemological challenges posed by late capitalism. Through our return to postmodernism's primal scene and our consideration of canonical works by Mark Lombardi and Cindy Sherman (works that are not normally considered together in the fields of art history or art criticism), we have pushed this project forward by pointing out the important role that seduction—and, in turn, process and duration—can play in helping to revitalize the dialectical image to address the challenges we now confront. As the wreckage accumulates around us and habituates us to the echoes of our own outrage, recovering our capacity for shock will become increasingly important. It is my hope that these observations have provided some useful guidelines for achieving this aim.

---

## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 261. [D](#)
2. By speaking primarily about the dialectical image's potential *effects*, Benjamin did little to clarify the means by which such an image might consciously be produced; still less did he provide an extensive catalogue from which one might infer its provenance, character, or composition. The problem becomes explicit when we consider how, in the "Theses," Benjamin suggested that the French Revolution's identification with the Roman Republic allowed Robespierre to lay hold of "a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history." On first blush (and despite the narcotizing effect of its poiesis), such an account seems plausible. But claiming that this resonant myth was a dialectical image required that Benjamin overlook the fact that Robespierre's Roman burlesque operated primarily as a compensation for the bourgeois revolution's inadequacies. As is well known, this was Marx's take on the matter. Despite the inevitable lack of heroism in bourgeois society, he recounted, "it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war . . . to bring it into being." Consequently, the revolution's architects and gladiators ransacked "the classically austere traditions of the Roman republic" to gather "the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of . . . their struggles." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works*, vol. 1. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 399 [D](#)
3. AK Thompson, "Matter's Most Modern Configurations: Rivera, Picasso, and Benjamin's Dialectical Image," in *Premonitions: Selected Essays on the Culture of Revolt* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 133. [D](#)
4. According to Missac, already by 1984, "a general critical bibliography" comprised of secondary sources on Benjamin contained "no less than 180 pages, despite lacunae that are certainly excusable." Given the general character of this secondary literature, Missac invited his reader to consider "why studies of Benjamin are often unsatisfying and even 'absurd' and then look at how one can avoid the dangers that

even a cursory analysis of such studies reveals." It is in part to this task that the current project is dedicated. Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 15. 

5. Given the enormity of the literature, it is beyond the scope of this investigation to review it in any systematic way. As a result, I have limited myself to drawing upon the work of Susan Buck-Morss who, in my estimation, remains the most valuable secondary source on Benjamin's oeuvre. This is especially true with respect to her exegetical treatments. Beyond this, I have followed Missac's lead by returning to Benjamin's texts to see what they might reveal when considered under our new, imperiled circumstances. 
6. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). 
7. The past few years have witnessed heated debates online and in the popular and alternative press about postmodernism's role in helping to secure Trump's victory. See, for example, Michiko Kakutani, "The Death of Truth: How We Gave Up on Facts and Ended Up With Trump," *The Guardian*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/14/the-death-of-truth-how-we-gave-up-on-facts-and-ended-up-with-trump>, and Aaron Hanlon, "Postmodernism Didn't Cause Trump. It Explains Him," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/postmodernism-didnt-cause-trump-it-explains-him/2018/08/30/0939f7c4-9b12-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/postmodernism-didnt-cause-trump-it-explains-him/2018/08/30/0939f7c4-9b12-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c_story.html). 
8. As a concept, seduction played an important role in postmodernism's theoretical development. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard's *Seduction* became an important reference point in the elaboration of postmodern critiques of logocentrism, which facilitated the capacity to countenance indeterminacy and celebrate play. While my use of the concept is in some respects adjacent to Baudrillard's, it should go without saying that I do not succumb to the latter's presupposition that action at the level of the signifier is the only game in town. Instead, seduction is invoked here as an invitation to embark upon modes of investigation that maintain the presupposition of a tangible reality or meaning beneath or behind the image, the sign. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991). 
9. According to Jameson, "the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital." By his account, meeting this representational challenge would allow us to "begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion." Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 54. 
10. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257. 
11. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 476. 
12. Benjamin, *Arcades*, 475. 
13. Quoted in Benjamin, *Arcades*, 467. 
14. Indeed, as Benjamin put it, "every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter." Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 264. 
15. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 463. 
16. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 146. 
17. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 263. 

18. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 191. [D](#)
19. Benjamin. "Surrealism," 191. [D](#)
20. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 220. [D](#)
21. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 5 [D](#)
22. It is significant to note that—in *The Arcades Project*—Benjamin actively distinguished the study of images, which he took to be the substance of historical knowledge, from the study of style. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 462. [D](#)
23. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18. [D](#)
24. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19. [D](#)
25. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 18. [D](#)
26. Appropriations of the rainbow flag by the “alt-right” began to be noticed in 2016, with the *Nation* reporting on how “street artist Sabo and his Unsavory Agents claimed responsibility for a spate of guerilla posters . . . featuring the Gadsden flag’s rattlesnake (Tea Party), laid over a rainbow flag (LGBTQ), with the hashtag #shootback” (anti-gun control).” Since then, the rainbow flag has been incorporated into an extensive array of rightwing memes, which interpret its discrete bands of color as a metaphor for national distinctness and purity. Ian Allen, “Alt-Right’ Is Not a Thing. It’s White Supremacy,” *The Nation*, November 23, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/alt-right-is-not-a-thing-its-white-supremacy/>. [D](#)
27. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 4. [D](#)
28. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 60. [D](#)
29. Considering newspapers that included feuilletons on their front page alongside the news of the day, Buck-Morss highlights Benjamin’s engagement with the fact that, in the nineteenth century, “the line” between “political fact and literary fiction” became incredibly thin. But while he anticipated how the “oppositions in which we have been accustomed to think may lose their relevance” and sought to develop an appropriate corresponding pedagogical strategy, even Benjamin would have been hard pressed to divine the extent of culture’s current economic subsumption. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 140. [D](#)
30. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 45. [D](#)
31. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 51. [D](#)
32. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 49. [D](#)
33. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 51. [D](#)
34. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25. [D](#)
35. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 50. [D](#)
36. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 54. [D](#)
37. Eleanor Heartney, “The Sinister Beauty of Global Conspiracies,” in *Defending Complexity: Art, Politics, and the New World Order* (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2006), 85. [D](#)
38. Heartney, “The Sinister Beauty,” 83. [D](#)
39. Mark Lombardi, “Artist Statement,” 1997, [www.pierogi2000.com/flatfile/mlavailable3.html](http://www.pierogi2000.com/flatfile/mlavailable3.html). [D](#)
40. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 461. [D](#)
41. Lombardi, “Artist Statement.” [D](#)
42. Heartney, “Sinister Beauty,” 85. [D](#)

43. Ryan Bigge, "Making the Invisible Visible: The Neo-Conceptual Tentacles of Mark Lombardi," *Left History* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 133. 

44. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460. 

45. Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2006), 84. 

46. Bigge, "Making," 128. 

47. Bigge, "Making," 128. 

48. Bigge, "Making," 128–129. 

49. The organization of material in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," for instance, sees Benjamin pairing historical figures with elements of material culture. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978). 

50. Skeptical of its potential, Georg Lukács nevertheless conceded that montage was "capable of striking effects, and on occasion can even become a powerful political weapon. Such effects arise from its technique of juxtaposing heterogeneous, unrelated pieces of reality torn from their context." Finally, he thought, "a good photomontage has the same sort of effect as a good joke." Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, by Adorno et al. (London: Verso, 2002), 43. 

51. Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi*, 41. 

52. Bertolt Brecht, "Can the Present-Day World be Reproduced by Means of Theatre?" in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 274. 

53. Hannah Westley, *The Body as Medium and Metaphor* (New York: Rodopi, 2008), 179. 

54. Westley, *The Body*, 179. 

55. Peter Schjeldahl, *Cindy Sherman: Centerfolds* (New York: Skanstedt Fine Art, 2003), 35. 

56. Sherman has deliberately refused to even inscribe her works with particular titles, which is the artist's due. 

57. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460. 

58. Norman Bryson, "House of Wax," in *Cindy Sherman: 1975–1993* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishers, 1993), 222. 

59. The Whitney Museum, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection* (New York: The Whitney Museum, 1993). 

60. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2. 

61. Kristeva, *Powers*, 9. 

62. Throughout "Convolute N," Benjamin makes several attempts to distinguish his conception of history from the one pervasive among bourgeois historians seduced by the myth of progress. In one such entry, Benjamin states, "the concept of progress had to run counter to the critical theory of history from the moment it ceased to be applied as a criterion to specific historical developments and instead was required to measure the span between a legendary inception and a legendary end of history. In other words: as soon as it becomes the signature of historical process *as a whole*, the concept of progress bespeaks an uncritical hypostatization rather than a critical interrogation." Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 478. 

63. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473. [D](#)
64. Benjamin, "Paris," 148. [D](#)
65. Kristeva, *Powers*, 5. [D](#)
66. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2009). [D](#)
67. Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 163. [D](#)
68. Indeed, such aestheticization cannot help but strike us as a faint echo of the fascist aestheticization of politics against which Benjamin warned in his essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. [D](#)
69. Magrit Brehm, *Ahead of the 21st Century: The Pisces Collection* (Hatie Cantz, 2002), 9. [D](#)
70. Brehm, *Ahead*, 8. [D](#)
71. Kristeva, *Powers*, 20. [D](#)
72. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 10. [D](#)
73. Similarly, Hal Foster has noted that while pop art may have sought to "use mass culture to test high art," the overwhelming effect was instead to "recoup the low for the high, the categories of which remain mostly intact." Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 60. [D](#)

 [Bio](#)

### AK Thompson

AK Thompson got kicked out of high school for publishing an underground newspaper called *The Agitator* and has been an activist and social theorist ever since. Currently a Professor of Social Movements and Social Change at Ithaca College, his publications include *Sociology for Changing the World: Social Movements/Social Research* (2006), *Black Bloc, White Riot: Anti-Globalization and the Genealogy of Dissent* (2010), *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle* (2016), *Spontaneous Combustion: The Eros Effect and Global Revolution* (2017), and, most recently, *Premonitions: Selected Essays on the Culture of Revolt* (2018). Between 2005 and 2012, he served on the Editorial Committee of *Uping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action*.



Yuh J. Hwang, "Aestheticizing the City Through Storytelling and Walking: Dublin's 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.6>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Aestheticizing the City Through Storytelling and Walking: Dublin's 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour

**YJ Hwang**

**ABSTRACT** The main concern of this article is situated in the theatrical experience of the 1916 rebellion walking tour as a broader mode of aestheticizing performance, focusing on the ways it traces the process of the tour to ask what the appeal is for international tourists in experiencing often tragic historical events through the use of performative strategies, namely, acts of walking and storytelling. By employing Walter Benjamin's notion of storytelling and Michel de Certeau's approach to the walking, this article intends to explore how the 1916 walking tour as a cultural practice rearranges and recreates the Dublin landscape, and how these new meanings are constituted aesthetically beyond their entertainment value. Furthermore, by placing this tour as performative genre, this article investigates how this historic event is embodied by the guide, perceived and transformed by tour groups, thereby creating tourists' kinesthetic empathy during the tour, by way of the guide's storytelling with their walking. In doing so, this article will offer a broader context of staging this historical memory that commemorates past events by way of physical engagement with this tour.

### The 1916 Rising and Irish Tourism

The 1916 Easter Rising stands as the founding event of the Republic of Ireland and is regarded as "one of the most talismanic moments" in modern Irish history.<sup>1</sup> Only fifteen hundred rebels who occupied a number of key buildings in Dublin engaged in the rising, while a group of Irish nationalists at the General Post Office (GPO) proclaimed Ireland as independent of Great Britain's rule. Yet they received little support from the Irish people at the outset. Within a week they were crushed by the British, and fifteen leaders were executed shortly after they were arrested. After that, public opinion shifted and the executed leaders became martyrs because of their bloody sacrifice for the sake of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

This iconic event in Irish history has transformed and re-emerged in the form of Irish tourism.<sup>3</sup> Susan Bennett argues that "a well-established tourism industry in Ireland has managed to promote a concept of fantasy to its visitors that over-determines the relationship of the tourist to the place."<sup>4</sup> According to Tim Edensor and Julian Holloway, "the selling of Ireland on the global tourist market by the Irish Tourist Board (Fáilte Ireland) is often marketed around five distinct themes: romantic nature, agricultural work, religious heritage, Celtic history and tradition, literature and folklore."<sup>5</sup> The 1916 Easter Rising comes into being as a cultural practice associated with mythic and legendary stories and the religious imagery of that Easter, thus appealing to a broader public within a global context. This is particularly true when one thinks of the mythic and sublime elements of the Easter Rising in Irish tourism, linked to the bloody sacrifice of the executed leaders, because the event may be understood as one of the founding myths of the Irish Republic. This explains why the Easter Rising could be viewed as "part mystery play, part melodrama, part avant-garde provocation."<sup>6</sup> This aspect of the event is highlighted by Dublin's 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour, in particular.

This tour was created in 1996 by Lorcan Collins, an Irish historian and the author of two books, *A Guide to Dublin in 1916* and *James Connolly*. The two-hour tour takes place at 11:30 a.m. on a daily basis from March 1 until October 31 and meets at a Dublin pub. It is regarded as one of the best tours by tourists because it proceeds in a dynamic and entertaining manner, regardless of the tragic features of this historic event.<sup>7</sup> When I joined the tour, I wanted to witness historic sites in person; I was somewhere between a tourist and a Dublin resident. As a non-Irish citizen who was researching early twentieth century Anglo-Irish drama at that time, I did not consider the city a tourist attraction nor a home.

What makes this tour interesting is the way in which it does not merely fall into the shaping of “a national landscape ideology” in relation to the founding myth of the Irish nation.<sup>8</sup> The Easter Rising is critiqued as simplifying the “contradictory” nature of the event as an iconic moment in Irish nationalism, due to the leaders’ lack of preparation for the rebellion in the short term and the misconception of “the actual date of the Irish Independence.”<sup>9</sup> But this walking tour demonstrates that the tourist’s experience could be aesthetical, rather than political, because of the way the tour is constituted.

With this in mind, this article is mostly based on my experience on the tour. Rather than generalizing the functional aspects of this walking tour as merely a reflection of the Easter Rising, the main concern of this article is situated in the theatrical experience of this tour as a broader mode of aestheticizing performance. It traces the process of the tour to ask what the appeal is for international tourists in experiencing often tragic historical events through the use of performative strategies, namely, acts of walking and storytelling. Judith Adler defines “travel as performed art” and this perspective might help to elaborate on a relationship between tourism and performance.<sup>10</sup>

What most characterizes this tour as performance is the ephemeral nature of this event as well as the way in which the tour unfolds for tourists. Dublin, where the tour takes place, is analogous to a “haunted stage,” which Marvin Carlson defines by stating “there clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory.”<sup>11</sup> This allows us to understand how Dublin functions as the haunted stage on which the tourist experiences a nationalist narrative of the Easter Rising, a narrative linked to Collins’ perspective on the martyrs’ sacrifices, death, loss, and the founding of the Irish nation. Given that the tour could have been slightly different each day, this tour also reveals the performance’s ephemerality and unrepeatability.

If “a distinct style of travel implies collectively sustained and successfully transmitted conventions of performance,” we need to consider that the uniqueness of this tour lies in the act of walking, as its name suggests.<sup>12</sup> Michel de Certeau describes “walking as a space of enunciation.”<sup>13</sup> Walking is a performative link between the guide and the tourists or between the tourists and the city. And the act of walking is framed by the interplay between the storyteller’s guidance and the acts of listening and seeing experienced by the tourists. Considering that the overarching aim of the tour is “to relax and to let go,” acts of storytelling and walking are aesthetical mediums for embodying the 1916 Rebellion Tour from the perspective of performance studies.<sup>14</sup> By employing Walter Benjamin’s notion of storytelling and Michel de Certeau’s approach to the walking, this article intends to explore how the 1916 walking tour as a cultural practice rearranges and recreates the Dublin landscape, and how these new meanings are constituted aesthetically beyond their entertainment value.

Collins states that the purpose of the tour is to enable the broader public to remember that “the Easter Rising is a seminal event in Irish history.”<sup>15</sup> This article presents an

intriguing case study to consider the way in which the legacy of the Easter Rising is remembered in the contemporary context. By categorizing the tour as a performative genre and challenging the idea that “tourism concerns the empty, postmodern consumption of otherness, is a passive, spectacle-oriented, disembodied and superficial pursuit,”<sup>16</sup> this article investigates how this historic event is embodied by the guide, and perceived and transformed by tour groups, and how this tour evokes tourists’ kinesthetic empathy through the guide’s storytelling and their walking. This article will thus offer a broader context for staging historical memory that commemorates past events on the basis of bodily engagement with this tour.

## The 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour as Performative Genre

The 1916 Rebellion walking Tour begins at 11:30 a.m. in the International Bar on Wicklow Street in Dublin. When I attended it, people from all over the world were present. To be specific, on that day there were around twenty people who came from the United States, Switzerland, India, Denmark and many other countries.<sup>17</sup> People of various ages, from their twenties to their seventies, participated in the tour. Before commencing the tour, Collins delivers an introductory talk lasting some twenty minutes in the basement of the pub, distributing handouts to the tourists. The handout contains photographs of the historical figures in relation to the Easter Rising and the proclamation entitled “the provisional government of the Irish republic to the people of Ireland” as well as the names and brief descriptions of Irish organizations such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Gaelic Athletic Association. The handout is red, representing the rebels’ bloody sacrifice; the color red is also found throughout the tour’s website. Framing the information for the tour with red colors reveals that the tone of the 1916 revolution tour is based on such a sublime attitude toward the actual event. However, the overall atmosphere of the tour is quite entertaining and staggering in terms of the way in which the content of the historical events is delivered to the tourists.

Collins offers a snapshot of Irish history from the Great Famine to the social and political contexts of the revolutionary period leading up to the Easter Rising. The historical overview serves to highlight the necessity of an Ireland independent from British rule, and to frame the context of the tour for the international group of tourists, many of whom have little to no knowledge of Irish history. This overview section of the tour could be likened to a pre-production in which the tour guide sets the stage for the rest of the tour. On the tours I attended, Collins told us, “Don’t worry about all the names. You don’t have to learn the names off. *Just knowing the story is more important than anything else.*”<sup>18</sup> This statement is important in determining a major characteristic of the walking tour as performative genre, as the tour guide is positioned as a storyteller. Danish journalist Peter Kyhl Olesen retells his experience of Collins’s passion for the subject matter after taking the walking tour:

[Lorcan Collins] is a divine story-teller and manages through his catching enthusiasm and huge knowledge about the topic *to dramatize the more factual parts of history* both before, during and after the Easter Rising, and he is capable of keeping the attention of the big group of tourists who are present day to day.<sup>19</sup>

This quotation reveals that Collins performs their role as a storyteller and is able “to dramatise” his story about the Easter Rising—something he has done for over two decades on an almost daily basis. Indeed, storytelling as a dramatic form is an effective way of appealing to tourists during the walking tour. Walter Benjamin observes how storytelling reveals its nature:

The more natural the process by which the storyteller forges psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer.<sup>20</sup>

What is noticeable here is that Benjamin links the nature of story to "a state of relaxation." According to him, this state of relaxation enables the storyteller to bring about a "process of assimilation" with the listener. Indeed, such an aspect of storytelling resembles a travel experience in which tourists enter "a state of relaxation" by means of the slow pace of their steps throughout the sections of storytelling in this walking tour. Before starting the tour, Collins's introduction of Irish historical overview leading up to the Easter Rising opens up the tourists to the process of assimilation. He places less weight on biography and dates than on emotional value before and during the tour, thereby diminishing the burden of knowing a particular history in detail, which most tourists do not know about. For example, when he says that "for some reason, the only way to get British attention was to shoot someone or blow something up," the tone of his statement is not restricted to delivering a sense of justification for the Rising, but to conveying an urgent sense of the desperation of the rebels in their dealings with their colonizers.<sup>21</sup>

In particular, "the process of assimilation" takes place by means of the interplay between the tourists and the guide. As Collins emphasizes, "the best way for you to get the most out of the tour is to interact, ask questions and give your own opinion." Accordingly, this gives us a clue to understanding this tour as performance in terms of its form and characteristic in the knowledge that "performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships."<sup>22</sup> Central to the mutual and interactive relationship between the guide and tourists in this walking tour, tourists could be understood as spectators from the perspective of the performance.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the fact that the interactive relationship between the guide and tourists encourages the latter to act as spectator-performers, this tour contains another inherent quality of performance, particularly when we notice that this tour runs on a daily basis. It would seem that running the tour on a daily basis is a ritual ceremony for Collins, and one that he has dedicated his life to in memory of the historic event. As Richard Schechner argues, "performance—of art, rituals, or ordinary life—are 'restored behaviours' ... performed actions that people train for and rehearse."<sup>24</sup> The repetitive ritual of this tour, revealing a performative quality, shows how Collins incorporates the historic event into the tour and himself as well, and maintains a sense of passion for the history he preserves.

What is more, Collins's storytelling plays a pivotal role in reinforcing his position as an artisan. This idea is more plausible when one considers storytelling as "the oldest form of craftsmanship" and "the art of repeating stories" of interest.<sup>25</sup> Throughout Collins's storytelling, the gaps between guide and tourists and between tourists and locals are reduced or collapsed, thereby enabling people of all ages to experience the walking tour vividly.

More importantly, what characterizes this tour as performance are two strategies, namely acts of storytelling and walking. Although this tour is not a conventional stage for theatre productions, the two fundamental strategies used by this tour invite the tourists to engage with them kinesthetically in relation to their interactions with the sites and the actual event of the Easter Rising. If we agree that kinesthetic empathy is defined "as a movement across and between bodies, which, in an artistic situation, can have affective impact with potential to change modes of perception and ways of knowing," then the

tourist's kinesthetic empathy during this tour is embodied in terms of responses to movement and the content of the actual historic event as well as encountering a local landscape while he or she travels on foot through the Dublin streets during the tour.<sup>26</sup> To put it another way, by delivering a synopsis of the historical background behind events leading up to the Easter Rising, this tour enables tourists to transform "layers of meaning, deep significance, unfamiliar symbolic codes, and portentous crowds" into the kinesthetic empathy that is evoked by Collins's storytelling as well as the tourist's walking.<sup>27</sup>

According to Collins, his aims for running the tour on a regular basis are "to keep the story alive and tell it the way it happened."<sup>28</sup> Like a performer in the theatre staging the Easter Rising, Collins revives the stories of the events by way of his storytelling embodied by gestures, movements, and speech. Indeed, the contents of the story which Collins delivered constituted fragments of songs, poems, films, and speeches that are deeply rooted in the Easter Rising. He passionately recited "All changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born" from Yeats' famous poem "Easter 1916," and phrases from songs and novels, such as *The Meeting of the Water* by Thomas Moore and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He also recited passages from Robert Emmet's hour-long speech, delivered on the eve of his execution for his role in the Irish rebellion of 1803: "When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written." Sometimes when reciting phrases or telling anecdotes of the Easter Rising, he imitated the voices of public figures, such as James Connolly, James Larkins, or Eamon de Valera. These cultural, historical references projected by Collins enable the tourists to encounter the specific moment and people of the history in relation to the rebellion during the tour. The images, the stories and lives of Irish historical figures, at times, converge on a sublime climate of sacrificing their lives for the nation. Guiding thirteen or fewer tourists at one time, Collins's storytelling of the historical memory are thus experienced in a quite intimate and interactive circumstance. The tourist's kinesthetic empathy is coupled by the fact that, as one tourist stated, "you might also laugh and you might also cry" while listening to Collins's storytelling.<sup>29</sup>

In particular, the tourist's kinesthetic empathy comes from the fact that Collins appeals to the tourists with a concrete and realistic sense of historic anecdotes relating to the Easter Rising. For instance, by explaining Irish republicans' involvement in the Rising, he emphasized the difficulty of divorce or being a vegetarian in the 1910s. This explains why one of tourists claimed that "you could not imagine this from school history. He tells of the human side of the event which makes the history more real."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many tourists on the tour agreed with this sentiment.<sup>31</sup> In other words, by following the story told by the guide, they were able to undergo an empathic resonance with the circumstances surrounding the 1916 Rising.

Based on their kinesthetic empathy, the tourists also create a performative discourse in their participation during the tour. They produce their own text in each living moment of the tour. Alison Oddey is well aware of this aspect:

In performatively walking the city the spectator creates a narrative. The spectator navigates multiple spatial realities to re-define and re-invent the past and present of the theatrical space of the found performance place of the city, and in so doing, re-contextualises self-identity.<sup>32</sup>

During the walking tour, the tourists interact with each other or with the guide through greetings, casual conversation, and the shared appreciation of the Dublin landscape. These interactive activities take place as they move from one place to another during the tour. When they look at the statue of James Larkin inscribed with Larkin's famous speech ("The great only appear great because we are on our knees. Let us rise") written in three

different languages, Irish, French and English, Collins asked the tourists who can speak French. One of the tourists volunteered to read the French version of the quotation from the statue. Admittedly, the tourists simultaneously create their own porous touristic narrative to combine their activities with the story being delivered by the guide. Here, Dublin is not only a source of a performative text for both the guide and the tourists in terms of reviving the emotional memories of the Easter Rising, but also “the mise-en-scène” for staging the historical memory in accordance with connecting the past with the present through the walking tour.<sup>33</sup>

## **Witnessing Origin and Sensory Awareness of Dublin Landscape**

Dublin is filled with statues, monuments, streets, and buildings which are named after the executed leaders or associated with the remembrance of the Easter Rising, including Liberty Hall, the GPO, and O’Connell Street. These sites and monuments function not only as places of national and local importance and reflection, but also as a contemporary landscape of Dublin’s ability to communicate with tourists through time and space.

Once the tour starts, tourists move towards the north side of the city. Here, the act of walking is structured through the guidance of storytelling and the acts of listening and seeing performed by the tourists. As Michel de Certeau points out, “walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajectories it ‘speaks.’”<sup>34</sup> In this way, tourists’ walking is a performative medium connecting them to the act of witnessing these symbols of the origins of modern Dublin.<sup>35</sup>

For the most part, the tourists walk along the roads and on footpaths, amongst the buildings of Dublin’s city center, where the rebels took hold of a number of relevant locations during the Easter Rising. It is significant that the 1916 Rebellion Tour begins and ends walking on Dublin’s streets. Integral to the characteristics of the walking tour itself, this structure foregrounds the interplay of the tourists and the roads. As J’aimé Morrison argues, Irish roads are “conduits for movement and memory operating within the larger spatial history of Ireland.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the act of walking serves to inscribe historic events in the context of the 1916 tour.

The tour proceeds with a number of short stops—seven during the tours which I attended. These stops create this tour’s pacing and rhythms, given that “tourism is typically constituted by a blend of placed and mobile rhythms.”<sup>37</sup> In the first such stop, the tourists move to an entrance of Trinity College Dublin that is close to the International Bar, which serves as a gathering point. After listening to a synopsis regarding the relationship between Trinity College Dublin’s sectarian education policy and the 1916 Rising, and noting some relevant places that the British army and the rebels occupied, such as Shelbourne Hotel and the Royal College of Surgeons, the tourists move on to the statue of Thomas Moore. They then cross O’Connell Bridge, looking over Liberty Hall, and head to other sites on O’Connell Street, a main thoroughfare in the centre of the city. Notably, there is a pedestrian area in the middle of O’Connell Street, allowing the tourists to see a broad view of the city. While walking toward the city center, the guide points out Liberty Hall and the Custom House, two key buildings attacked and used by the army respectively. They are near the General Post Office that was occupied and used as a barracks by James Connolly and other 1916 leaders.

During the tour, Collins embodies “the silent text of buildings” and revives the historical memory of these sites and buildings in the context of the Easter Rising.<sup>38</sup> Dublin’s historic places are thus embodied and reconfigured. For instance, in front of the Bank of Ireland on College Green, the tourists could listen to a discourse on the window tax that was in

operation throughout Britain and Ireland and which affected the appearance of the building, which contains no window glass. On O'Connell Bridge, participants are told about the relationship between Daniel O'Connell and the campaign for Catholic emancipation in the early nineteenth century. These sites underline the tourist's relationship to "conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places."<sup>39</sup> By rearranging and re-acting the city, "imagined geographies" of Dublin are mapped out.<sup>40</sup> After going inside the GPO, the tourists moved to a site where five members of the Provisional Government were located on Moore Street, and the tour finishes. Of all the places visited in the two hours, these two final spots arguably produce the strongest concrete sense of the Easter Rising. The GPO, where Patrick Pearse read the proclamation of the Republic of Ireland, is an especially evocative place. Here, the tourists can observe bullet holes embedded in the building's columns as the physical scars of historic events. Collins also describes the destruction of Dublin city and the execution of the rebels in accordance with General John Maxwell's controversial dealing with them, foregoing proper legal procedure, and the effect this had on public opinion. If I felt somewhat strange and emotional inside the GPO building while listening to his explanation of what took place here, that would be due to the gap between such a past and the present. Indeed, the GPO serves as one of the most key sites for the 1916 Rising since the ruins of the city were recovered. The very place where the rebels proclaimed independence also serves a major role in Irish people's social welfare, being linked to the Department of Social Protection. This somewhat inexpressible feeling continued in a different way when the tourists reached the last headquarters of the provisional government during the Easter Rising on Moore Street. Beside a fruit market and an adjoining shopping area, this historic building seems isolated and hardly recognizable, as if it were a buried place. The tour ended with Collins's emphasizing the importance of preserving this site.

Typically, the walking tour ends with either a visit to the GPO, Moore Street, or, in some cases, Dublin Castle. Regardless of different destinations, the walking tour brings a sense of empathic cohesion to the tourists in terms of the rebels' urgent need for independence. As Stanton B. Garner Jr. claims, "walking the city becomes a way of redrawing the city's landscape."<sup>41</sup> It is thus important to note that Dublin's monuments and buildings relating to the Easter Rising contribute to shaping the landscape of memory of the rebels, thus forming Dublin's local identity. This is how its landscape is represented for tourists coming to visit Dublin. Therefore, we can say that during the tour, walking through Dublin is understood as an act of witnessing this modern city's origins.

More crucially, the tour provides a form of pleasure to the tourists and this likely stems from the fact that as Dean MacCannell notes, "tourism engages more of the senses than sight."<sup>42</sup> The 1916 walking tour is based on the Irish Republic's origin. By visiting seminal sites related to this historical memory, apart from the beauty of contemporary Dublin's landscape or its vitality, tourists could be aware of Dublin city in a sensory manner while walking through the city.

Walking is "a sequence of interruptions and encounters."<sup>43</sup> All kinds of sensory experiences occur, including noises, the sensation of Dublin's variable weather, and conversation regarding the tourists' awareness of the city—the traffic lights, road markings, streets, trees, etc. A statue of James Larkin stands close to the GPO on O'Connell Street. While Collins tells of the relationship between James Connolly and James Larkin during the 1913 lockout surrounding Bloody Sunday and reads out an excerpt from Larkin's famous speech, inscribed into the front of the statue, the sound of the passing Luas line interrupts and becomes mixed with Collins's recitation. Local acquaintances also interrupt, saying hello to him during the tour.

While looking at a quotation from Sean O'Casey's autobiography *Drums Under the Window* on the other side of the statue of Larkin, the tourists could see locals passing by behind at varying speeds. On the spot marking the centre of Dublin, the tourists could view the entire intersection of the street, which is saturated with noises of vehicles and movement of people. These fragmentary, sensory experiences juxtapose the guide's storytelling with the tourist's individual walking experience, shaping the images of Dublin which the tourist perceives. "Touristic experience takes many forms,"<sup>44</sup> so that the walking tour reveals embodied moments of sensory forms, which could shape the tourists' impression of significant sites on the tour.

Interestingly, such sensory experience is highlighted by the fact that the tourists' leisurely pace functions as a constant flow of the relaxation which enables them to experience sensory awareness of the city in their own way. Furthermore, stopping places along the walk punctuates the narration, moving the stories forward throughout the tour. These transitional moments become an important part of the rhythm of the tour. Through constructing and transforming Dublin's cityscape, the tourists create and rearrange their perception during the walking tour. This explains how the tour is embodied as a performance genre that commemorates the Easter Rising as historical memory.

## From Landscape of Origin to Origin of Landscape

The writer Alain de Botton says in relation to the pleasure of travel that "a dominant impulse on encountering beauty is to wish to hold on to it, to possess it and give it weight in one's life. There is an urge to say, 'I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me.'"<sup>45</sup> Such pleasure comes from a feeling that "to be a tourist is above all to be a willing stranger."<sup>46</sup> The pleasure of travel to new and different places is to divorce oneself from reality and to create a distance from one's own reality. This link for a tourist's identity matters in relation to shaping an imaginary landscape:

Identity is often located in a specific physical landscape, and through the changes in that landscape, the memory of times when it was different, changes in the self may be perceived and registered .... But imaginary landscapes are also important in the construction of identity.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the pleasure of travel implies (re)creation and (re)arrangement of this imaginary landscape where the tourists rearrange and recreate the perception of their environment. While attending the walking tour, tourists perceived and conceived a landscape of origin by ascribing meaning to Dublin's landscape and the history of the Easter Rising via the guide's storytelling and their act of walking. Here, the tourist's experience of kinesthetic empathy during the tour turns and inscribes this landscape of origin into an origin of landscape.

Acknowledging that "sightseeing is one of the most individualised, intimate, and effective ways we attempt to grasp and make sense of the world and our place in it," the formation of an imaginary landscape is also a way of understanding the nuances of a particular place.<sup>48</sup> The following review written by one tourist from Quebec City, Canada highlights this point.

*This tour far surpasses any historical tour I have ever been on.... My students are French-speaking and yet they were captivated by his every word. I am amazed that he does this tour on a regular basis because information is delivered in such a fresh way ... If you go on to travel around Ireland, as we did, you'll soon find out that this tour will have taught you the history you need to fully appreciate Ireland's past and the struggle of its people.*<sup>49</sup>

This statement gives a resonance to tourists beyond a specific nationality. By writing a review, this tourist formed their own perception of the tour and this is linked to how they remembered Dublin city and Ireland as “a remnant landscape.”<sup>50</sup> In this regard, the 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour reveals that a key element to shaping a particular local landscape is empathy between the tourists and the guide or between a tourist’s individual interest in Irish local history and their interaction with the tour. However, this sense of empathy could also occur between generations. Collins describes touching moments while running the tour:

The most special moment on the tour in all the years was when I had a group of school children from The Glenties in Donegal who were all about 14 or 15 years of age. We were all gathered at the statue of James Connolly and we bumped into Father Joe Mallin who is the son of one of the executed leaders Michael Mallin. At the time he was 94 years of age and living and teaching in Hong Kong but he was visiting Ireland. I introduced the young children to Fr. Mallin and explained who he was and without any prompting all the children burst into a spontaneous round of applause. It was wonderful to see the bridge between the two generations and it is something that I will never forget.<sup>51</sup>

Collins’s sharing this experience indicates how a sort of empathic community is formed during the tour “between the two generations” during the tour. According to Collins, he already has an inscription planned for his grave: “He did a walking tour.”<sup>52</sup> Although he said this during the tour in a humorous manner, it implies what the 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour means for him. The tour comes from one man’s life-long contribution to Irish history as well as a historical record of Irish tourism. Collins “feel[s] very proud of this historic event” and thus the tour is totally based on his own nationalistic perspective.<sup>53</sup> In this respect, the 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour reveals one of the multi-vocal accounts of the Easter Rising in the contemporary context.

Based on these foundations, this tour gives tourists a specific pleasure in their sensory awareness of the Dublin landscape, and an empathy toward local history. Since these pleasures result in the performative form of this tour, they are not confined to any locality, and this 1916 walking tour thus delivers an emotional resonance to tourists experiencing this tour. This is how the 1916 walking tour is perceived and remembered by people. Recognizant of the fact that “When the Rising is re-told it is not necessarily the same event that is remembered each time,” this tour could be placed in the context of commemorating the event on a broader level.<sup>54</sup>

In fact, the staging of the Easter Rising has been “contested” because of the way in which the heroism of the rebels have been dealt with since 1926 when Sean O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* was first staged and Irish audiences protested against the play.<sup>55</sup> Along with theatre productions of the Easter Rising as well as official commemorative events, the 1916 Rebellion Walking Tour demonstrates how this historical memory, (re)created through walking and storytelling, aestheticizes the city and provokes remembrance by international tourists.

## Notes

1. James Moran, *Staging the Easter Rising 1916 as Theatre* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), 1. 
2. Conor Kostick and Lorcan Collins, *The Easter Rising: A Guide to Dublin in 1916* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2000), 24–37. 
3. There are diverse historical tours related to this event such as “The 1916 Easter Rising Coach Tour” and “The 1916 Easter Rising Taxi Tour,” which allow visitors to

explore the main sites of action, such as the GPO and Kilmainham Gaol where the leaders were executed. 

4. Susan Bennett, "Performing Ireland: Tourism and the Abbey Theatre," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 30, no. 2 (2004): 31, [!\[\]\(ce860acce0c37d1263a23799ae5115aa\_img.jpg\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25515525)
5. Tim Edensor and Julian Holloway, "Rhythmanalysing the Coach Tour: the Rising of Kerry, Ireland," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (September, 2008): 489, [!\[\]\(53f9fb1f5d5cfe3149e361fb4c745ae9\_img.jpg\)](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2008.00318.x)
6. Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890–1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 224. 
7. The travel website tripadvisor.ie displays 379 reviews of the tour, most of which rate it as "excellent" or "very good": In 379 reviews, 372 reviews indicate these favorable responses to the tour. "1916 Rebellion Walking Tour," TripAdvisor, [http://www.tripadvisor.ie/Attraction\\_Review-g186605-d614200-Reviews-1916\\_Rebellion\\_Walking\\_Tour-Dublin\\_County\\_Dublin.html](http://www.tripadvisor.ie/Attraction_Review-g186605-d614200-Reviews-1916_Rebellion_Walking_Tour-Dublin_County_Dublin.html), accessed May 11, 2015. 
8. Edensor and Holloway, "Rhythmanalysing the Coach Tour," 489. 
9. Whelan Feargal, "All Hats and Moustaches: Commemorating and Performing 1916 in 2016," *Estudios Irlandeses* 12, no. 12 (2017): 141–43, [!\[\]\(04e3e55e8b8346f3c7d4480cc4727c55\_img.jpg\)](http://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/indexnavy.htm)
10. Judith Adler, "Travel as Performed Art," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 6 (May 1989): 1366–1391, [!\[\]\(6d65fb7457a5a1371ae214c23f136b57\_img.jpg\)](https://doi.org/10.1086/229158)
11. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 8. 
12. Adler, "Travel as Performed Art," 1378. 
13. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1988), 98. 
14. Tim Edensor, "Performing Tourism, Staging Tourism: (Re)producing Tourist Space and Practice," *Tourism Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): 62, [!\[\]\(4c084b8631ecf2f58de2b66f6e90bad1\_img.jpg\)](https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100104)
15. Collins's comments during the tour. 
16. Edensor and Holloway, 486. 
17. I attended the tour twice, in fall 2012 and spring 2013, the latter of which I recorded and took notes during the tour. This article is mostly based on my attendance on April 5, 2013 in particular. I cannot deny the fact that the tour could have been slightly different each day, but regardless of my limitations of seeing the tour twice, my experience, for the most part, matches the other tourists' opinion written on the trip advisor website. 
18. Emphasis added. 
19. Peter Kyhl Olesen, "Dublin: In the footsteps of the rebels," October 2011, 2, accessed July 25, 2018, [!\[\]\(852dd3988a8493a885d3b98d2e6864f6\_img.jpg\)](http://www.1916rising.com/reviewKyhlOlesen.pdf). Emphasis added.
20. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935–1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2002), 149. 
21. Olesen, "Dublin: In the footsteps," 1. 
22. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 24. 

23. Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 94. 
24. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 29. 
25. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 149. 
26. Dee Reynolds, "Introduction," in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (London: Intellect Books, 2012), 88. 
27. Dean MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing* (Berkeley and Los Angles: University of California Press, 2011), 184. 
28. Interview with Collins by email, April 7, 2013. 
29. "Moving and Informative," TripAdvisor, accessed January 21 2019, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction\\_Review-g186605-d614200-Reviews-1916\\_Rebellion\\_Walking\\_Tour-Dublin\\_County\\_Dublin.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g186605-d614200-Reviews-1916_Rebellion_Walking_Tour-Dublin_County_Dublin.html). 
30. "A Memorable Lesson in History," June 25, 2012, [http://www.tripadvisor.ie>ShowUserReviews-g186605-d614200-r132747001-1916\\_Rebellion\\_Walking\\_Tour-Dublin\\_County\\_Dublin.html](http://www.tripadvisor.ie>ShowUserReviews-g186605-d614200-r132747001-1916_Rebellion_Walking_Tour-Dublin_County_Dublin.html). 
31. On the Irish travel website, 385 among 396 people reviewing the tour commented that the vividness of the tour is based on highlighting the rebels' lives in a concrete manner, and that would shape their impression on the tour. TripAdvisor, accessed June 8, 2015, [www.tripadvisor.ie](http://www.tripadvisor.ie). 
32. Alison Oddey, *Re-Framing the Theatrical: Interdisciplinary Landscapes for Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 137. 
33. Oddey, *Re-Framing the Theatrical*, 102. 
34. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99. 
35. Edensor, "Staging Tourism," 340. 
36. J'aime Morrison, "'Tapping Secretes of Stone': Irish Roads as Performances of Movement, Measurement, and Memory," in *Crossroads: Performance Studies and Irish Culture*, ed. Sara Brady and Fintan Walsh (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 73–74. 
37. Edensor and Holloway, "Rhythmanalysing the Coach Tour," 486. 
38. Oddey, *Re-Framing the Theatrical*, 104. 
39. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99. 
40. Edensor, "Staging Tourism," 326. 
41. Stanton B. Garner Jr, "Urban Landscapes, Theatrical Encounters: Staging the City," in *Land/Scape/Theater*, ed. Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 104–105. 
42. MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, 186. 
43. Edensor, "Staging Tourism," 340. 
44. Kennedy, *The Spectator and Spectacle*, 94. 
45. Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 218. 
46. Kennedy, *The Spectator and Spectacle*, 94. 
47. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, "Introduction: Contested Pasts," in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 11. 
48. MacCannell, *The Ethics of Sightseeing*, 6. 
49. "Highly informative and entertaining," TripAdvisor, June 18, 2012, <http://www.tripadvisor.ie>ShowUserReviews-g186605-d614200->

[r1322458491916 Rebellion Walking Tour-Dublin County Dublin.html](#). Emphasis added. 

50. Dydia DeLyser, “‘A Walk through Old Bodie’ Presenting a Ghost Town in a Tourism Map,” in *Mapping Tourism*, ed. Stephen P. Hanna and Vincent J. Del Casino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 95. 
51. Interview with Collins by email, April 7, 2013. 
52. Collins’s statement during the tour. 
53. Collins’s statement during the tour. 
54. Moran, *Staging the Easter Rising*, 1. 
55. Moran, *Staging the Easter Rising*, 14. 

 [Bio](#)

**YJ Hwang**

YJ Hwang is researching South Korea’s Jeju massacre and its cultural memory for her doctoral project at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research interests include gender, memory, and mobility.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Dwaipayan Chowdhury, "Disruptions - An interview with Jacques Rancière," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.7>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Disruptions—An interview with Jacques Rancière

**Dwaipayan Chowdhury with Jacques Rancière**

**ABSTRACT** This interview concerns the premise of 'aesthetics', as a certain regime of identification, which intervenes within the domain of 'politics' and 'history of art', as configured in the ideations of Jacques Rancière. From this general premise the discussion provokes us to particularly re-configure the concept of 'modernism' in art that is not solely defined through simplistic comparisons with 'post-modernism'. Instead, a re-configuration of 'modernism' lets us reconsider the 'Avant Garde' project from the methodology of an 'aesthetic community' formulated during the French revolution existing still in the texts of the young Marx of the 1840s. The logic of representations in art moves beyond the objective structures of 'Dialectical Reason', and instead gets aligned to the aesthetic logic of being spatio-temporally 'surplus'. Furthermore, it is the aesthetic logic that introduces the heterogeneity of political symbolizations that underlines a multiplicity of process as against a distinct strategy linking theory and practice thus even challenging a global rationality of defining 'what is art?' (Art History) and 'what is politics?' (Politics). It is based upon these contingent reversals of the signification of the world, of trying to identify the singular points of disruptions connecting to or not connecting to make a whole, that the interview concludes with questions on the multiplicity of possibles.



Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence

*W. B. Yeats*

With this reference from *Sailing to Byzantium* the art historian Clement Greenberg takes us to a quandary.<sup>1</sup> This quandary pertains to the efficacy of (western) art in general with regard to the operations of artistic systems. With "of its own" Yeats takes us to the magnificence of the monuments. For Greenberg, what is at stake in this journey to magnificence is the establishment of the cleavage, within the integrity of artistic systems, that chalks out two paths. This introductory exposition will deal with the character of the cleavage and its two paths. Our aim will be to place this interview within the backdrop of the cleavage in the first half of the twentieth century thus announced by Greenberg.

The first path is the path of autonomy of art. In fact, this path leads nowhere, wherefore lies its significance. I shall also deal with another path that leads to nowhere. Therefore, we must differentiate between the first path and the second path. I read the significance of the first path, as explicated in Greenberg's thesis on the avant-garde, as a complete containment within the formal features of art at the expense of its content.<sup>2</sup> How is this complete reversal to form achieved as the main component of artistic autonomy? What is this artistic autonomy? How does Greenberg locate the avant-garde?

The problem that Greenberg poses is fundamentally based upon the constitution of objects in/as art.

Before defining artistic autonomy, we shall first define in a cursive way, the object that is constituted. The object I refer to here might be determined through the Kantian *matter*. In

Kant, *matter* is ensconced in the object within the empirical domain. *Matter* is placed within the triadic relation between sensation, appearance and form.<sup>3</sup> The three concepts of sensation, appearance and form are categorized as follows: sensation is the affect of the objects where the object effects a capacity for representation; appearance is the undetermined object where the object has already effected a representation; form is that which orders the manifold undetermined appearances in certain determined relations, i.e., the domain of the *a priori* knowledge removed from all sensations and hence is the domain of concepts.<sup>4</sup> Contrarily, *matter* is the content of appearance that only corresponds to sensation and therefore can never be conceptual.<sup>5</sup> From such a categorization one might label the sensation of *matter* as the paradigm of experience, i.e., if we consider experience as that domain of non-knowledge brought about by pure content.<sup>6</sup> Thus, through a brief definition of the object we have before us its three properties: content, appearance, and form. Now we go back to Greenberg to elaborate upon his conception of constituting objects in/as art. The conception that, I argue, embarks on the path to artistic autonomy, a path to nowhere.

The artistic system of the avant-garde, for Greenberg, was a moment of culmination in history, the abstractions of which were formulated through a “detaching.”<sup>7</sup> This detachment that Greenberg refers to as an “emigration from bourgeois society to Bohemia” was not only a repudiation of bourgeois politics, but also a retreat from public that even downplayed revolutionary politics.<sup>8</sup> Such a detachment tears apart the figure of the citizen-artist, a figure that somebody like a Plekhanov tried to recover even in Pushkin’s condemnation of the public (“Begone, ye pharisees! What cares / The peaceful poet for your fate?”).<sup>9</sup> Here, we arrive at that inexhaustible polemical stance—art for art’s sake. But how does such a stance constitute the object? Precisely by what Greenberg dubs as the avant-gardist “expression of the absolute.”<sup>10</sup> The absolute is the process where “content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”<sup>11</sup> The absolute process is not relative and does not get involved in the contradictions of society. This process is nothing but the constitution of the object as appearance, without content, i.e., the constitution of the object as the appearance of pure form. But what is this pure form that Greenberg rates so highly for the avant-garde and that is simultaneously the principle component of artistic autonomy? The pure form is the principle of abstraction that for Greenberg has a genesis at a specific moment in history, i.e., modernity. We are concerned here with the principle of abstraction in modernity that Greenberg develops.

The principle of abstraction is the principle of non-representationality which, however, is not arbitrary. Abstract constitution of the object is the imitation (Greenberg applies the term in the Aristotelian sense) of the process of constitution itself. The artist treats the secondary relative quality of experience only by reverting to the primary absolute process. What he imitates is the discipline and processes of art. This imitating of imitation is not arbitrary because it has to obey the rules of a first, an original discipline of the medium. Once the content has been rejected, appearance is constrained by a self-imitation of pure form. Pure form imitating itself is the fact that the medium of art replaces the content of art. The medium becomes art’s content. This constraint of the medium, which it its autonomy, establishes form as the content of form. The condition of art is self-constrained, through an original restriction, to imitate the disciplines and processes of art. Such a reiteration of the medium Greenberg hails as the “genesis of the abstract.”<sup>12</sup>

Medium constitutes the object as medium. This principle of abstraction is the basis from which Greenberg calls Surrealism “reactionary.”<sup>13</sup> Why? Because Surrealism’s preoccupation did not lie solely with artistic means. Rather than a sole engagement with arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, and colors, a painter like Dalí had a tendency to

restore “outside” objects.<sup>14</sup> This “outside” is the domain of appearance not as form but as the experience of content. Such an experience is nothing but the consciousness that connects art to real transformations in life. Rather, autonomy of art replaces any concepts of conscious experience with the processes of the medium and form: a novel about the novel, a painting about painting.

Autonomy, as the operation of the self-constrained artistic system that implodes the artwork, lends it depth. There is only one destination: nowhere. However, this path to nowhere is the path of intellect. Intellect is the absolute. The connoisseur gets drawn to the artwork’s beyond side, thus imbibed away from living. Evoking the stylistics of the Byzantium sojourn, one may conclude there is no country for old connoisseurs. The sensual music neglects old connoisseurs but the monument, as the monument of intellect, stands firm for them. Intellect decides, when Greenberg elevates a Picasso to a higher level than a Ripkin.<sup>15</sup> Ripkin’s realism hides the technique. As such, the content is laid bare to experience immediately, on the surface. Such a superficial mediation does not require a higher reflection of the intellect. This experience is of an immediate recognition that conjoins art and life. Because there is no discontinuity between art and life, the self-containment of the autonomous absolute is disrupted. On the contrary, Picasso’s abstraction keeps the medium specificity of the artistic system intact. The system attains autonomy because it lets one derive ultimate values from art at a second remove<sup>16</sup>—a second remove that finds a path beyond the immediate experience towards the intellectual absolute, the realm of the higher reflection of the connoisseurs.

The autonomy of the intellectual absolute replicates the autonomy of the Hegelian “scientific knowledge” of the arts.<sup>17</sup> In Hegel, knowledge determines the object of art through a formal constitution within the original restriction of the ever-evolving absolute form—totality. The science of totality cancels the immediacy of the object through a determination of historical phases, i.e., from whence the object is derived and towards what it progresses. Such a historicity of the object gets intertwined with the genealogy of the “lonely” artists of the avant-garde in Greenberg.<sup>18</sup> Autonomous historicity of forms is the determination of appearance to the absolute annihilation of content. At stake here is the intellectual audacity to be an intellectual without life. The monument perhaps would be more magnificent in its autonomy without a Yeats. We arrive nowhere.

## II

The second path is the path of the aesthetic regime of the arts, in other words, of the politics of aesthetics. Artistic autonomy considered aesthetics only as a relative value in the domain of experience.<sup>19</sup> As such aesthetics had to give away to absolute form. But a fundamental problem remains with autonomy: the problem of choice. Either Ripkin or Picasso. The choice is based on the historicity of the artistic constitution of the object, i.e., modernity, and ignores what is constituted, i.e., the object and its experience. There is no freedom in this choice. The arbitrary choice of form has an insufficient program because the form itself is both the immediate and the original. As a result, historicity is the sole condition that exists to the irrelevance of the particular object.

This irrelevance of the object, in turn, takes us to Adorno’s critique of Sartre’s dramas, dramas constructed through the necessity of choice of the characters. Adorno is concerned with the unfreedom of characters because of the fact that within the immediacy of an original choice the content remains intact as a predetermined reality.<sup>20</sup> The critique is both subjective and objective. The characters are not subjective because their choice keeps the ground of the administered world unaltered. The characters are not objective because they cannot divest themselves from their enclosed subjectivity to become a subject that registers the particular object in history. What I draw from this

critique, where the subject should register the object to become subjectively objective, is the annihilation of the necessity of historicity of the object. The object is no longer stuck within the cyclical loop of the Hegelian “scientific knowledge.” Ontologically speaking, being subjectively objective is the absence of Hegelian totality. It is never—neither the realist Ripkin or the modernist Picasso. Neither does a Rembrandt anticipate a Picasso. Rather, the object that was totally intellectualized in autonomy is available again to the domain of experience without completely foregoing the effective objectivity of forms. The object frees itself from the oppression of forms. Experience and knowledge coexist in an indeterminate state of balance, a path to nowhere. A state that Schiller calls aesthetics, a state of being, which is the springboard to Rancière’s politics of aesthetics and is fundamental to our title, disruptions. Disruptions might be considered as the original ground of historicity constructed through unfree choices, a trope central to politics of aesthetics.

Aesthetics as a state of being, as Schiller defines it, is the active determination of a free situation located at a medium position.<sup>21</sup> This free medium position contains an irreconcilable mutual negation, i.e., where both the sensation of content and the intellect of form is negated. Affirmation through negation, is the active determination of appearance where it does not have to suffer the torture of form or the promiscuity of content. Such is the state of the free in appearance.

Rancière’s system, if politics of aesthetics can be called a system at all, puts this state of the free at its centre. Aesthetics as configured by Rancière does not deal with art per se. Rather, politics of aesthetics, if it deals with art at all, treats aesthetics as a specific experience of pure art that leads to the self-suppression of art. As a result of this self-suppression art gets translated to life whereby aesthetics gets translated to aestheticopolitics. What gets disrupted is the separation of art and life that autonomous art promises. The tactic of disrupting the separation is a tactic of “aestheticization of common existence.”<sup>22</sup> Now, what is this aestheticization of common existence?

We start from the indistinctions of form and content innate to the free state. The indistinctions of the aesthetic state operate through Rancière’s insistence on Schiller’s *Spieltrieb* (play drive).<sup>23</sup> The *Spieltrieb* is the medium of translation enabled by aesthetics that disrupts the self-containment of art and conjugates it with life. The translation that reconstructs thus the edifice of both art and life is aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience transforms the historicity of the object as in modernity through the experience of an *and*. The *and* is the conjugation between autonomous art *and* its simultaneous grounding in life anticipating real transformations. Suspension of both the form and content in the medium position of balance is the experience of indeterminate indistinctions in appearance. The object emerges beyond any determination by knowledge, i.e., beyond any scope of reversal to the absolute as in autonomy. The ground of historicity that modernity bases itself upon crumbles.

What emerges in such experience directly affects common existence in everyday life. Aesthetic experience, as a domain of affect, disrupts modernity primarily by destabilizing its structures of judgment. These structures of judgment define themselves by articulating one’s appraisal of the object through concepts. This disarticulation in appraising inherent to aesthetic experience reconstitutes the object in a regime of indistinctions. Crucial here are these two expressions—first, the regime of indistinctions innate to aesthetic experience, and second, the mode of being affected by aesthetic experience.

With regard to the regime of indistinctions innate to aesthetic experience, we shall take a Deleuzean detour to reach the Rancièrean position. Indistinctions in Deleuze is a

condition of engaging with the world where being cannot refer to any model of legislation, i.e., cannot choose any preference. It is a world in process, an archipelago. Islands can never constitute a whole but are parts in a wall of uncemented stones floating in isolation and having a value in itself yet in relation to others.<sup>24</sup> The Deleuzean indistinctions thwart any reconciliation of the islands/parts to land/pure form because “truth has always had jagged edges.”<sup>25</sup> Rancière both agrees and disagrees with Deleuze. For Rancière, indistinctions in aesthetic experience operate until such indistinctions constitute objects in the domain of lived experiences debunking life as a transcendental field. What is meant by life as a transcendental field is the condition of life that does not refer to either a subject or an object but rather is the stream of an a-subjective consciousness, i.e., a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness without a self.<sup>26</sup> The life condition that Deleuze proposes is the condition of being that does not enable a transcendence of the form of wounds as a higher actuality. Rather wounds exist always within the milieu of experience. We reach an agreement between Deleuze and Rancière. Disagreement begins when Rancière equates the indistinctions of the Deleuzean archipelago image with a political indifference.<sup>27</sup> Rancière’s question is how one might articulate differences through the disruptions of the political community when common existence is premised solely on the indistinctions of the uncemented stones of the wall forever sliding up against each other?

With regard to the regime of indistinctions innate to aesthetic experience, we shall take a Deleuzean detour to reach the Rancièrean position. Indistinctions in Deleuze is a condition of engaging with the world where being cannot refer to any model of legislation, i.e., cannot choose any preference. It is a world in process, an archipelago. Islands can never constitute a whole but are parts in a wall of uncemented stones floating in isolation and having a value in itself yet in relation to others.<sup>24</sup> The Deleuzean indistinctions thwart any reconciliation of the islands/parts to land/pure form because “truth has always had jagged edges.”<sup>25</sup> Rancière both agrees and disagrees with Deleuze. For Rancière, indistinctions in aesthetic experience operate until such indistinctions constitute objects in the domain of lived experiences debunking life as a transcendental field. What is meant by life as a transcendental field is the condition of life that does not refer to either a subject or an object but rather is the stream of an a-subjective consciousness, i.e., a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness without a self.<sup>26</sup> The life condition that Deleuze proposes is the condition of being that does not enable a transcendence of the form of wounds as a higher actuality. Rather wounds exist always within the milieu of experience. We reach an agreement between Deleuze and Rancière. Disagreement begins when Rancière equates the indistinctions of the Deleuzean archipelago image with a political indifference.<sup>27</sup> Rancière’s question is how one might articulate differences through the disruptions of the political community when common existence is premised solely on the indistinctions of the uncemented stones of the wall forever sliding up against each other?

As such we have the return of a disruptive judgment in aesthetic experience which stalls affect to foreground its effect. The mode of being that is effected in this blockage is a constitution of the object through the actualization of *dissensus*. However, the effective dissensual mode of being is never completely rid of the affective dimension of aesthetic experience. Here again we confront the free zone of indistinctions where the subject emerges. The subject now activates or determines the impotent condition of experience through an imperative capacity of the aesthetic experience which leads to a repartitioning of the contours of common existence. The anticipation of the subject emerging in indistinctions was already prefigured by Arendt, in her critique of the declaration of the “Rights of Man” during the French revolution, in the context of the mass migrations of refugees following the first world war.<sup>32</sup> Arendt’s critique was primarily based on the alienation of the modernist subject position constituted in the Rights of Man even from those inalienable rights that make it impossible for a collective recognition. Such a human

condition is the condition of anonymity, i.e., a life without qualities. A bare condition of life, that Rancière calls “deprived life,” is a condition to which all human responsibilities are disallowed.<sup>33</sup> This is a life without personality. Such is the surplus condition of life without personality/form that lays bare the zone of indistinctions as opposed to any constitution within the “Rights of Man.”

The subject’s quest for a personality in the context of these rights and the subject position inherent to it takes the subject also to a path that leads nowhere. The mode of being tries to approach form, by determining the object, with the aim of staking a claim within the “Rights of Man.” But in the Rancièrean politics of aesthetics such a determination becomes impossible<sup>34</sup> The mode of being can never constitute the object purely within the region of human rights. The pure region of human rights becomes a region of the already administered object. This administration is the administration that Foucault, in “*Omnes et Singulatim*,” develops as the theory of police. The police regime of state is its pastoral character, where the state departs from its ideological foundations, and becomes the shepherd exercising sheer control over life and bodies of the flock.<sup>35</sup> For Rancière even human rights, or the forms of philanthropy built on the ground of the “Rights of Man,” become a designation of the police to the extent that police does not refer to any institution but rather designates a management of lives, objects, and spaces, i.e., the management of the distribution of the sensible.<sup>36</sup>

A return of the mode of being to the sensible is a return to experience at the cost of pure rationality. Politics of aesthetics as an experience is a mode of being that constitutes the object as a mode that obstructs the Hegelian personality of the object always geared towards a reconciliation in absolute knowledge. The mode here is precisely that lacuna that Hegel faced with the Spinozist mode.<sup>37</sup> In Spinoza, as Macherey notes, the object is substance in indistinctions, i.e., without a measure of its difference to other objects and therefore lacking the individuality of the Hegelian being-in-itself/particular. Macherey further elaborates that unlike the Hegelian absolute where the object as being-in-itself is reconciled in absolute knowledge, the absolute in Spinoza is the interplay of a triad. This triad is the constitution of the development of the object: first, a *substantial identity* of the object completely withdrawn into itself; second, the external manifestation of object confirming the initial affirmation of *substantial identity* through a reflection in its *attributes*; third, the singular disposition of a passage whereby the *attribute* of the object attains the status of a *mode* reflecting the absolute process. The object is constituted as substance. If we follow Macherey’s study we might conclude that instead of the reconciliation of the object as knowledge as in Hegel, in Spinoza it decomposes to a nowhere. Aesthetic experience in the Rancièrean politics of aesthetics is the experience of such a passage to nowhere in appearance. The Rancièrean mode of being reconstitutes the object in the effective differences of singularities but simultaneously these singular reconstitutions are without measure, wherefore their affective potential. To go back to the monument in Byzantium, one might conclude then that the monument urgently requires the poet. Its magnificence is that each poet adorns it with new stones that are different but are so in their indistinctions. We arrive nowhere.

---

**Dwaipayan Chowdhury:** Your elucidation of the shortcoming of the notion of modernity is premised on the double failure of modernity both as the domain of the autonomy of art and as modernatism. By autonomy of art I mean the pure formal aspects of art where it only explores the capabilities of its specific medium. On the other hand by modernatism I refer to the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of arts that you point out as forms fulfilling a destiny specific to modernity which constitute a new region of being, the region of free play and appearance. You claim that the autonomy of art failed because of its distance from the numerous political possibilities innate to the

mixture of genres and mediums. Conversely, modernism which emerged at the moment of the misplaced encounter between the artisans of a Marxist revolution and artisans of forms for a new way of life also could not hold. Modernism, defined in terms of the dual artistic response to, on the one hand an absolute forgetfulness about the Other, and on the other, the irreducible aspect of the unsymbolizable object, rather anticipate the aesthetic avant-garde. Now, this aesthetic avant-garde furthermore anticipates the egalitarian future even by eclipsing the role of the political avant-garde. Could you please elaborate upon this premise?<sup>38</sup>

**Jacques Rancière:** The point was about modernism and post-modernism. When I first really talked about aesthetics and art it was in response to a certain idea of the end of art or the end of aesthetics which was itself included in a view of the end of history. Post-modernism is a concept which has no real content. What I mean by that is that post-modernism does not really designate a specific form of art or a specific practice of thinking of art. It is supposed to designate the end of modernism as a certain idea of the development of history. It is a notion that means something to the extent that you agree with the idea of modernity and modernism that it presupposes. I argue that post-modernism is a concept entirely predicated on a kind of self-definition of modernity. To be short, I would say there are probably two levels in the definition of modernism and modernity. There is the concept of modernism that was elaborated around the 1940s by Clement Greenberg more or less in agreement with the thinking of the Frankfurt School that the idea of modernity in art means the autonomy of art which now deals with its own material, its own procedures, no more representations, etc.<sup>39</sup> Post-modernism was a response to that definition of modernity in art, but that definition is really a joke. If modernism means something in art and if avant-garde means something in art it does not mean that art now deals with its own practice, medium, and material. It means exactly the contrary: a certain idea of the conjunction of art and life. There is a second level. If we refuse this very simplistic notion of modernity and modernism, you have to consider what probably can be defined as a historical avant-garde project, which was a project of connection between art and life, based on the idea that art is able to create a new fabric of common life. This is linked with the historical experience of the revolutionary avant-garde in Soviet Union. But there is also the German avant-garde, Bauhaus let us say, crystallizing the experience of the first thirty years of the twentieth century. At this level you define a very different idea of what modernism and modernity is.

Simultaneously, there is a simplistic idea of this “avant-garde” project, that there was a faith in history, that there was a great dream of Western thinking to recreate the world and very often this is assimilated to the project of emancipation in general. There is often this kind of identification of the idea of the modernist project as a kind of global and historical faith in the development of history: the idea that the historical process will produce by itself a kind of global transformation of all political, social structures and the avant-garde project is thought as part of this big dream of Western reason. Things are much more complicated. There are at least two elements. First, at the moment of the French revolution there is idea of an “aesthetic community” which goes through the work of Schiller, Hölderlin, the young Hegel, the young Schelling. There was the idea that true revolution is not simply a revolution in the structures of power, in the law, in the state, but a revolution of the practical way of inhabiting the world. There was the idea of a revolution in the modes of being, perceiving, and doing. Then this project of a true sensible revolution was incorporated into the project of social emancipation. Think of the texts of young Marx in the 1840s when he opposes the human revolution to the political revolution which comes directly from this big project at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. There was this project of a revolution of the sensible that would be something stronger and more important than the political revolution.

Second, if an avant-garde project, if an aesthetic modernity means something, it means something in this context. There is also a third point about the very idea of avant-garde. There is a simplistic idea of the avant-garde of the proletariat, of those who have the Marxist science or those who are able to lead the masses with the light of science. Also, there is the idea of the avant-garde of the young who want to adhere to modernity, to electricity, to steel, iron, concrete, speed, etc. This idea of the avant-garde is associated with people implementing some kind of futurist project, like the futurist manifesto of Marinetti in the 1910s. So there is the idea of avant-garde as people fascinated with electricity, with cars, with speed, with machines, etc. I think these two visions, which are of the avant-garde as the people leading the cattle and the avant-garde as the futurists fascinated with the new technology are very simplistic. What is important is that the idea of the avant-garde is not so much of people going forward as much as it is the idea of people trying to deal with the contradiction of temporalities.

In my book *Aisthesis*, I commented on Emerson's "The Poet" from the 1840s which ideates that America is in a chaos. It is a chaos because at the same time you have economic modernity, industrial modernity, etc., but there is no common thread giving some kind of unity to this movement.<sup>40</sup> The idea that modernity is divided because there are lot of new things in the domain of material production, in the domain of economy, but there is no new form of being together. This is probably the true idea of the avant-garde. Not the idea that you go forward, but the idea that you are living in a time which is a time of conflicting times. The young Marx of the 1840s says in his texts on Hegel's "Theory of Right" and "The Critique of Hegel's Theory of Right," that modernity is divided because you have an emancipation of thought, in the German philosophy of freedom, but at the same time the administration and the policy of the German states are still feudal. Furthermore, Marx states that it is contrary to France where there is political action but no theoretical thinking. Therefore, we have a very different idea of the avant-garde. Avant-garde is the force that tries to deal with this conflict of times. The Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s becomes an example because film makers like Eisenstein, Vertov were not simply worshipers of the new economy, of the industry, but instead what they tried to do was to create with their art (as with all the so called avant-gardists) something like a kind of common fabric of common life or common sensorium. To create communism, at this moment there is an opposition between the idea of the avant-garde carried out by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (where revolution is a very long process with gradual steps) and furthermore, the idea of the avant-garde creating the idea of communism which was the project of many artists. Artists were concerned with doing a lot of things, creating forms of urban décor, creating posters, etc. It was also the idea of the avant-garde of the Bauhaus in Germany where you anticipate by creating some kind of aesthetic communism while social communism does not yet exist. Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* is a good example. The film is a diary of a day in a town with all the activities from morning to night. Most of those activities are not at all modern, not at all communist. They are everyday insignificant activities, but the film creates communism as the thread linking them all to make some kind of global symphony. You see women in a beauty parlor just having their nails done. There is nothing communist about this. What is important is not the activity in itself, but the way in which this activity of doing the nails is connected by the camera with the activity of the editor of the film, with cutting/scratching of the film and pasting and likewise a lot of different activities. So in this way we can say that the film maker creates a kind of aesthetic communism by creating a link between a multiplicity of activities which are utterly heterogeneous, and which in a way belong to very different ages: shoe-shining in the streets, as well as women working in the assembly line in the factories, or men working in a mine. This is for me what really the avant-garde meant from an aesthetic point of view.

DC: It is from the perspective of the everyday activities that I make a reference to Althusser here, specifically to his essay on Bertolt Brecht and Carlo Bertolazzi. There also we are confronted with the question of daily mundane activities specifically in Althusser's analyses of the performance of Bertolazzi's drama *Ei Nost Milan*. Here one gets to observe in detail the everyday of the sub-proletariat of 1890s Milan. Pertinent here is the way Althusser treats the mise-en-scène to foreground its significant materialist structures. How are you differentiating or deviating from the Althusserian structures in terms of signifying mundane activities?<sup>41</sup>

JR: What is important for Althusser is the dialectical idea. For him the representation is dealing not so much with the play as it is dealing with the mise-en-scène of Giorgio Strehler, because the play is a kind of melodrama. What is important for him is a kind of dialectical relation such that the mise-en-scène by Strehler shows that the characters of the play written by Bertolazzi belong to the ancient time. We see that those people are living in a kind of immobile world. So we become aware of the necessity of new time by looking at those people who live in this kind of immobile time. This is quite different, which is of course a Brechtian view, than looking, let us say in a simplistic way, at people who are doing things the bad way we understand the good way of doing things, which for me belongs to a second age of modernity. Because it is absolutely different from and absolutely not the position of Vertov. In Vertov, there is no question of becoming aware by seeing people doing badly. All those people who are doing heterogeneous things already belong to communism. They belong to the extent that the filmmaker, that the artist creates this common fabric within which all those activities are intertwined. Of course this is completely different with the argument of Althusser or with the Brechtian logic of the Althusserian arguments. For me this is the opposition between the aesthetic logic and the representative logic. Representative logic is a logic precisely in which you see people doing or behaving this way, and normally you see people who behave as bad people or as ignorant people and you learn from the ignorance. You learn from the ignorance and you become aware out of the ignorance. I very often cite this extraordinary statement by Roland Barthes about Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Barthes says because we see that Mother Courage is blind we become lucid. So we become aware by looking at somebody who is not aware. This is the representative logic. For me the aesthetic logic is entirely different because it is not a matter of seeing something, judging something and drawing some conclusion from what you saw to what you must do. It is a matter of being part of a kind of material transformation. The aesthetic logic, as in my example of Vertov, makes the spectator part of another way of being together, another way of being in a same space, another way for which all activities, all modes of doing are interrelated. This is the opposition to the representative logic where you are supposed to see people doing in a certain way and become conscious because they are not conscious and lucid because they are blind. This is the global framework of the difference.

DC: What could be the possible relation between cross-mediality or inter-mediality and the aesthetic regime of the arts? Might one consider the operations of aesthetic regime through crossovers across artistic media? In this context of crossovers might we regard your analyses, for example, of *Au Hasard Balthazar*, in which you refer to a certain fragmentation and the way this fragmentation become a site for reducing an action to its essence? Does this fragmentation proliferate references to cross-medial or inter-medial aesthetics? The multiple media that modernity applies, can those be assumed with such notions?<sup>42</sup>

JR: I don't use the notions of inter-mediality or cross-mediality as operators in my analysis. My discussion on *Au Hasard Balthazar* was about the image and the question as to whether the image is determined by the medium. I tried to say that the status of the

image, as an operation, is not determined by the medium. There was, at that moment, a discussion opposing cinema to television, saying that cinema produces image which are witnesses of alterity while in the television the image comes from the box, i.e., the image is just the effect of the box. I objected that you can define the image independently from the surface on which the image appears. In *Au Hasard Balthazar*, the images of Bresson must be first defined as operations and those operations are the same whether you see Bresson's film in a movie theater or whether you see it on the screen of the television. Of course the quality of the image is not the same, what you perceive is not the same but the operation that creates the image is the same. The cinematographic image is not the image of what has been in front of the filmmaker, for instance, at the beginning of *Au Hasard Balthazar*, a little girl, a little boy, and a donkey. The image is a certain set of operations which makes you expect something and something else appear on the screen and thereby you have a dissensus. The artistic image consists in making a form of connection between the words and the visible, between a shot and the following which runs different from the normal interconnection. Consensus means that you can reasonably predict the next image. This is often the case with television, but it is not an effect of the technical *dispositif*. It is the effect of the social *dispositif* within which it works. Instead, the image made by Bresson is an operation, a set of relation between a shot and an overshoot between the sound and a lot of operations. The artistic image is always in a form of disjunction or a form of dissociation. This for me is different from the questions of cross-mediality or inter-mediality. I don't define the image by the crossing of several media. I define it by a disjunction that can perfectly operate within one single medium, because (it may be the contrary) the disjunctions mean that you cannot define the nature of an image from simply the medium that produces it.

It is true that I also question this modernist idea that an art is defined by its specific medium, by its specific relation to its own medium. If modernity means something in art, it means a certain form of disruption of the normal distribution of the medium, of the normal use of the medium. This is what I tried also to say about typography, about the way in which the page of the book could be thought no more simply as the white surface on which text is printed but as having a certain form of autonomy or a certain form of interrelation with other pages which is not a matter of textual relation but a relation with the space. I discussed it about the case of Stephan Mallarmé. Mallarmé is supposed to be a poet emblematic of modernity as medium specificity. It is actually the contrary. He conceives of the problem in a way such that the problem is not simply textual, but rather concerns spatial distributions so that two pages of the book can become like a theater. A stage, that lets you imagine the relation of the letters and words on the page as a choreographic relation. I insisted that Mallarmé was inspired by dances, musicals, etc. He tried to rethink poetry by imagining some kind of writing in space which was more or less inspired by forms of dance and performance in theaters and musicals. It is very important for me in the history of modernist art or avant-gardist art to chalk out this attempt to go through different media and to create new forms of sensory fabric by mixing different mediums and the laws of different mediums. Putting together poetry and dance or perhaps choreography and film, theater and circus, etc. They all are history of the really high moment of modernism in art, when there were attempts to create new forms of time, space, and performance blending coming from different arts. From poetry, from painting, from theater, from dance, from gymnastic, from sports.

The problem with the idea of cross-mediality is that it implies that you have technical tools to create cross-medialities. But the crossing is aesthetic before being technical. In the case of a video-installation, the television monitor at the same time can play the role of a sculpture defined by the volume that it occupies in the space and the role of the flat surface on which you see mobile images. It is an example among many examples. You can

create all kinds of mixing of image, of video, of sculpture, of music, of performance, etc. If you think of the high moment of the modernist project it was not possible for this kind of cross-mediality to exist. There were no computers, no video, sound systems, etc. When Mallarmé tried to create the page as a theatrical stage he had none of our technical means. Now [it] is quite easy. You see it in computer works, video works when effectively the page starts transforming itself in a film, dance, etc. He had not the technical tools, but he had the aesthetic program. What interests me is this kind of anticipation—that the aesthetic of cross-mediality exists before the technological means. This is very important for me. There was this big argument everywhere that art is transformed by new technology accompanied by a simplistic reading of Benjamin about the mechanical arts. I tried to question these simplistic ideas that new technologies create new forms of art. Cinema and photography do not simply become art as a consequence of technology because the technology has existed long ago before photography and film were recognized as art. Being included in the sphere of art presupposes a certain aesthetic. The aesthetic is not the simple consequence of the technological but rather it exists before the technological. Photography could become an art when it stopped trying to be artistic by a lot of procedures and instead adopted the realistic aesthetic that was created in the novel, the idea that you can create beauty with the everyday, with the mundane. There was a long time during which photography tried to create some kind of fantastic atmosphere by a lot of technical artefacts, which did not work. It worked when photography decided to show cars in the street, chimneys of factories and boats, the spectacle of the street, etc. Thus, cross-mediality becomes part of the same logic, meaning that the aesthetic of cross-mediality existed before the technologies of cross-mediality. If you think of the art of the post-1910s and 1920s, sometimes posters, plain two-dimensional surfaces try to create some kinds of reconstruction of the architecture of the common world. The technical means are not there but the project is there.

**DC: Can the dissolution of the artistic genres as in the aesthetic regime become a corollary in the political processes as well? By that I mean as to whether the blueprints of the diverse forms of collective living so akin to the aesthetic regime translate into an “eclectic” model for political regimes where the strategies of revolution pertaining to definite social categories get intertwined?**

**JR:** Revolution is always made of different temporalities. It was quite important that the 1968 student uprising in Paris started with barricades in the streets, which was a very old fashioned strategy. Even during the 1848 revolution one of the socialist leaders, Louis Auguste Blanqui, said that the barricade from the military point of view is really counterproductive. But the barricade is not only a military instrument. It is a way of constructing a certain opposition between the protest and the government or society. In a military struggle it is anachronistic. But you have very different elements and very different temporalities which get into revolutionary or subversive situations. I do not think it is a matter of eclecticism. Wherever you had in history a kind of revolutionary moment or situation you had a lot of elements that were heterogeneous. You may have the military aspect or the symbolical aspect (*mise-en-scène*) and they belong to different moments. In the French revolution of 1789, you have elements belonging to all traditions of popular riots, because popular riots happen very often in history. But there is a moment when a popular riot, belonging to a long history, acquires a quite different form of visibility. Why? For instance, if you take the Bastille Day in France (14 July 1789), where the crowd of Paris attack the prison of the Bastille, it is an old-fashioned popular riot. But this old-fashioned popular riot takes on an entirely new meaning because at that moment there is the national assembly in Versailles: the representatives called by the king, in the frame of an old monarchic form of gathering of the people, had decided to change their own status and to become representatives of the people. In this context the popular

uprising acquires an entirely new meaning. It becomes a manifestation of the sovereign people. So you must have this kind of visibility given by the assembly gathered in Versailles to give to what happens in the streets of Paris. You may have at the same time uprisings in the country and uprisings in the streets of the town, a kind of insurrection on the official stage itself. You have multiplicity, in any situation, of forms of struggles, of forms of symbolization. For me this means it is not a matter of eclecticism. The point is that "normally" there should not be revolutions. So when they happen, they happen because of heterogeneous elements belonging to different temporalities at the same time. In Paris 1968, you have the students making barricades which is entirely old-fashioned, a memory of the nineteenth century. At the same time there was one factory in the French provinces in Nantes where strikers had sequestered the managers in their office. This was a new form of the sit-in strike. At that moment the students took up the workers' practice of occupation by occupying the Sorbonne. Afterwards factories were occupied everywhere in France. There is this kind of exchange: the students creating a global stage and giving its meaning to a single strike. Also there are kinds of exchanges which create global movements or global stages composed of things entirely (not entirely) independent from each other. The problem with so many theories on revolution is that they always try to think of itself as the distinct process with the idea that there is a strategy and there is an uprising and after that there is the result. It never works. The point is not let us say theory against eclecticism. It is the reality of the multiplicity of processes against the idea of a clear cut deduction of causes and effects coming from a strategy. You have always the same kind of discourse where ever you have a movement. There are always those people saying that there is no strategy, no program, so this is just shit. But movements always came first and movements always were heterogeneous.

**DC: Your espousal of the politics of equality is connected to a redistribution of the sensorium regarding any regime of police—be it theory, history, discipline, law, occupation, genre, pedagogy, “pure” politics. In this regard what could be the point of departures of these disjunctive aesthetic regime/s from the violent aporetic notion of deconstruction, where deconstruction primarily refers to questions on the ontological?**

**JR:** I do not have this systematic idea that you try to describe. The idea of deconstruction supposes there is a kind of global, dominant discourse and that it is the work of the philosopher to deconstruct the global discourse, logocentrism, or any kind of things like this. In the case of Derrida, there is a kind of mainstream construction of Western reason and then you have to deconstruct it. Perhaps the point is not deconstructing the dominant logic than really trying to identify the elements that constructs such logic. That was my point about revolution which is made up of many processes. The point is not deconstructing the idea of revolution as a kind of manifestation of a global idea of Western reason. It is trying to identify the points, the places when and where there are disruptions and try to think how this singular can or cannot make a whole. Such operation is also what is important for me in the question of literary democracy. The fact that literary democracy is not the same as political democracy. You can define multiplicity of forms of disruptions that do not add up to make a kind of global deconstruction. I was trying to identify specific singular forms of disruptions that may be for instance thinking of social emancipation through the diaries of workers. It can be the thinking of literary disruptions from something specific, that it is always trying to think out of and from the consideration of singularities. I never decided to work on politics. I am not interested in reconstructing or deconstructing political traditions. I am interested in trying to think as to how, in a certain historical circumstance, the very idea of being a worker takes on a new meaning. My point about emancipation was trying to think what happens in the experiences of a number of workers at a specific moment in history that produces this “subjectivation,” this reversal of the signification of the world. This process is what

interests me at the same time when I try to identify some specific operations in the history of art in the Western world from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. There are moments when something which was not supposed to be art becomes art, when a show in a music-hall (Loïe Fuller) can inspire a poet (Mallarmé) and makes him think there is a new aesthetic in the mere development of a gown. There are moments when techniques such as photography, cinema, etc., become art. What interests me is always the construction of some kind of global logic from singularities. I am not interested in Western reason in general. Philosophers are obsessed with the ontological as a kind of global or fundamental level from which you can deduce all forms of subversions and all forms of singularities. So they think that they can from the ontological level define what politics is, what art is, what science is. I think that usually the results of such operations are rather disappointing because the singular is always the repetition or reformulation of the ontological. There are always these attempts to create some kind of wrong deductions because everything must cohere. There is no evidence that there is a global rationality linking what we call art, what we call politics, etc. I think that all those things are singularities that happen in a contingent way in the history of a part of the world. Sometimes I am told that what I say about the history of art are not valid because I don't take into account other traditions like the Chinese one. But I am no art historian. I am interested in modes of construction of worlds, the art world or the world of politics for instance, that are done by putting things and words, situations and significations together. The Chinese tradition of painting is certainly different from the Western tradition. But that's not my point. I have studied the way in which a certain regime of identification of art was created in the Western world alongside other traditions and other modes of conceptualization and the way in which this regime has acquired a certain form of universality that makes that the same idea of the art world structure the practices of artist and curators today in China as well as in Brazil, Nigeria, Russia, or any other country in spite of all the differences of the traditions of art making in those countries.

**DC:** Do these singularities manifest themselves in terms of art through a "return" of the pure surficial encounters in representations, i.e., the necessity of the "surficial" which introduces indistinctions between itself and its disavowal?

**JR:** I can't really know. For me the present and perhaps the future is more about heterogeneity. The idea pertaining to modernity in art elaborated around the 1930s or 1940s, insisted that the destiny of art was abstraction. According to this logic (if you think of Clement Greenberg) there was this idea that old painting was representation and new painting is abstraction. And it was totally wrong. This means that abstraction was part of something much more global, much more complicated that could produce things entirely different. What for me characterizes the aesthetic regime is the possibility of multiplicity of things. It is in fact really the withdrawal of any principle of global legitimacy which becomes very important. If you think about painting there was a time when it was possible to say this was a good painting for this or that reason. Within the aesthetic logic there is no such possibility. There are some technical procedures that try to implement certain ideas to create some kind of space, some kind of sensorium and people really relate themselves to that sensorium but no more with this idea that "it is beautiful because of this or that." It is not my decision but I think we really live in a multiplicity of possibles. There are certain forms that are dominant at certain moments; it can be abstract painting, it can be installation. But basically what we are looking at now are a multiplicity of things. One of the performances of the Venice Biennale in 2015 was the reading of Marx's *Capital*. During the six months of the Venice Biennale, there were people reading entirely the *Capital*. The reading of the *Capital* is an artistic performance alongside with the multiplicity of other artistic performances. Therefore, the idea of performance can now can include anything. It can include the reading of a book, as well as the construction of a

space. I do not think now you can say either the future is the surface or future is the destruction of the surface though we are at a time when perhaps those distinctions are not working. The space of art is not the global construction according to judgment of value. The global configuration of the space is more important than what is in that space. In the space you can have videos, screenings, paintings, living performance. It is the whole space which is now the work of art. There is this kind of reconstruction of space and of course it is still more obvious because so many art spaces now are disused factories and arsenals, etc. Art is made by the configuration of space more than it is made by the collection of artworks in those spaces.

---

Acknowledgment – I thank Anirban Kumar, my fellow research masters student from Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi, India) back in 2013, who convinced me to record this interview.

---

## Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 7. [D](#)
2. Please refer to Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 3-21. [D](#)
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 172-173. [D](#)
4. Kant, *Critique*, 172-173. [D](#)
5. Kant, *Critique*, 172-173. [D](#)
6. For further study on the equivalence of experience to content, see Friedrich Schiller, *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, ed. N. H. Dole (Boston: Francis A. Nicolls & Co, 1902), 3-110. [D](#)
7. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [D](#)
8. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [D](#)
9. G. V. Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life*, trans. A. Fineberg (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 5. [D](#)
10. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [D](#)
11. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [D](#)
12. Greenberg, *Art*, 6. [D](#)
13. Greenberg, *Art*, 7. [D](#)
14. Greenberg, *Art*, 7. [D](#)
15. Greenberg, *Art*, 14-15. [D](#)
16. Greenberg, *Art*, 14-15. [D](#)
17. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 22-25. Here, I particularly refer to Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, where he tries to develop a philosophy of the arts through scientific conceptualizations. [D](#)
18. See Greenberg's attempt to locate Rembrandt as the first potential avant-garde. Greenberg, *Art*, 17. [D](#)
19. Greenberg, *Art*, 6. [D](#)
20. Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 180. It must be mentioned here that Sartre never espoused autonomy in art. [D](#)
21. Friedrich Schiller, *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, ed. N. H. Dole (Boston: Francis A. Nicolls & Co, 1902), 73. [D](#)
22. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 116. [D](#)
23. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 116. [D](#)

24. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensations* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 22 and 162. [D](#)
25. Panagia, *Political Life*, 22 and 162. [D](#)
26. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 25. [D](#)
27. Panagia, *The Political Life*, 22. [D](#)
28. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensations* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 22 and 162. [D](#)
29. Panagia, *Political Life*, 22 and 162. [D](#)
30. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 25. [D](#)
31. Panagia, *The Political Life*, 22. [D](#)
32. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 290–302. [D](#)
33. Jacques Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 298. [D](#)
34. Jacques Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 297–310. [D](#)
35. Michel Foucault, “Omnès et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of ‘Political Reason,’” [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/f/foucault81.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/f/foucault81.pdf). [D](#)
36. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 95. [D](#)
37. Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 13–32. [D](#)
38. Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), 26–30. [D](#)
39. Greenberg, *Art*, 3–21. [D](#)
40. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, trans. Zakir Paul (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 55–74. [D](#)
41. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 129–152. [D](#)
42. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 5. [D](#)

 [Bio](#)

#### **Dwaipayan Chowdhury**

Dwaipayan Chowdhury is presently a Doctoral candidate with the "International Research Center - Interweaving Performance Cultures" at the Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Daniel Zamora, Anton Jäger, "Historicizing Basic Income: Response to David Zeglen," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.8>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Forum: Universal Basic Income  
Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Historicizing Basic Income: Response to David Zeglen

**Daniel Zamora and Anton Jäger**

**ABSTRACT** This piece argues that Basic Income is, and has never been, a simple "common sense" or "spontaneous" idea for those who want to struggle against poverty. In fact, it but the product of a profound shift in how we thought about the social question since the late 19th century. A shift that, by the mid-sixties, made cash transfers and the price system the main tool when thinking about redistribution against collective provision or more state-centered approaches.

In his [introduction to the UBI Forum](#), [Dave Zeglen](#) argues that basic income should not be understood as an "irrational demand." Instead he casts it as a "common sense" response to capitalist excess. Rather than an instance of "false consciousness," basic income is therefore an "empirical and limited" recognition of a reality not imposed from "above" but coming directly from "below"—a natural plight for the downtrodden. [Zeglen](#) makes a convincing case that the Left should not overlook the laudable impulses implicit in basic income demands but rather "insert them directly into progressive political narratives."<sup>1</sup>

Strategically, there is little one could object to in this view. It is indeed the case that basic income is not an "irrational" demand or a "false consciousness." However, basic income's political content is not as obvious as Zeglen suggests, and certainly is far from a "common sense" idea coming from below. Stating this overlooks the entire intellectual history of the idea and how the proposal only turned into "common sense" after conceptions of work, poverty, social justice, redistribution, or the state underwent some dramatic changes. The basic income is therefore only "irrational" in hindsight. Or, our contemporary idea of a basic income—a continuous, discretionary grant uncoupled from any prior performance of labour—would certainly look extremely strange (one could say "irrational") for any worker or thinker in the nineteenth century. In fact, its contemporary form was designed to respond to problems that were radically different to those discussed by Thomas Paine, who put forward his own "land grant" in the 1790s, or the socialist economist Oskar Lange, who was one of the first to argue for a "social dividend" in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

There are some potential losses here. If we lose sight of the radical novelty of the idea—constituted, as it was, as a response to the decline of the centrality of work and of the postwar welfare state—we may easily fall into an empty transhistorical celebration. To put it differently, prior to Milton Friedman, almost nobody promoted a society where the alternative to full employment would be the maintenance of "workless" subjects through the transfer of a social dividend or basic income. Oskar Lange, Abba P. Lerner, or G. D. H. Cole's versions of a "guaranteed income" remained strongly tied to full employment schemes and never really even operated with a society where people would receive payments without working as a proviso.<sup>3</sup> This simply didn't make sense to them. Moreover, such proposals were conceived in a society where the means of production had already been socialized. The same held for more right-leaning versions. Even Juliet Rhys-

Williams's first version of the idea was, as observed by Peter Sloman, always accompanied by a strong conditional clause, in which workers would sign a "social contract" where they committed themselves to participate in the labor market.<sup>4</sup> Only with Friedman did these work requirements and their contractual dimension disappear.

In that perspective, basic income certainly is not a spontaneous response coming from below, but rather the crowbar to break open a new dominant anti-poverty framework in a society where access to the market and to income has become the prime modality to reproduce oneself. The question we should rather ask is the following: *how* exactly did we come to think about social justice in those terms?

A crucial turning point was the 1930s. This period saw the slow downfall of the discipline of welfare economics and the discrediting of the state as a collective decision-maker in economic thought. This was also a moment when poverty was increasingly conceptualized in terms of "income deficiency" rather than positions vis-à-vis a market set-up. It was also a time in which economists would increasingly cast the price system, rather than the state, as the privileged apparatus to allocate goods in society. This was a stark break, even with previous liberal reflexes. In spite of their internal differences, economists like Arthur C. Pigou, Alfred Marshall, or Richard H. Tawney indeed generally tied the question of equality to a criticism of the dominant role the market had taken in society as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

The discrediting of nineteenth-century liberalism was profound and shaped an understanding of equality embedded within the larger ideal of a post "laissez-faire" society. Where the market had failed to guarantee the material reproduction of the population, it was now up to the state to act by instituting ambitious programs of public housing, rent control, public service, or collective provision concerning health care, education, food, or even leisure. As Tawney argued in his well-known 1931 book *Equality*, the best strategy on the matter did not consist on "the division of the nation's income into eleven million fragments, to be distributed, without further ado, like cake at a school treat, among its eleven million families" but rather, through "the pooling of its surplus resources by means of taxation, and the use of the funds thus obtained to make accessible to all, irrespective of their income, occupation, or social position, the conditions of civilization which, in the absence of such measures, can be enjoyed only by the rich."<sup>6</sup> To Tawney this meant that a "just" society could not be limited to the simple redistribution of income but would also create democratic institutions capable of countering what Beveridge came to call the five "giants" ("Want, Squalor, Idleness, Ignorance and Disease").

This was a stark break with prior poor relief methods as well. In contrast to the nineteenth-century poor relief systems, the new categorical order had the important feature of being organized *against* the market rather than operating on its margins. Tawney's commitment to equality, for instance, was strongly embedded within a more general framework stipulating "social rights" and citizenship, rather than through the narrow lens of income distribution.

This conception remained dominant at least until the early 1960s. As the decade crept to an end, however, and the West's "persistent poverty problem" did not seem to wane, policy makers progressively placed the preservation of the price system at the center of any redistributive project. This increasing concern for the price mechanism had older roots, of course. It partially emerged out the "socialist calculation" debates of the 1930s and the downfall of "welfare economics" of the interwar period, which already severely affected the theoretical standing of the state as the ultimate collective decision-maker.<sup>7</sup> During the 1940s, cash transfers then began to gain traction as a more suitable alternative to collective provision options and heavy-handed state interventions imposed on the market. By the 1950s, finally, a vast majority of neoclassical economists became

convinced that the price system was more efficient than collective provision. The physical planning that had gained traction during war time now rapidly lost coinage in favor of a conception of equality conceived exclusively through cash transfers.

This was precisely the aim of Milton Friedman's Negative Income Tax (NIT), which imagined how to establish "minimum standards by means not inimical to initiative and the functioning of the market."<sup>8</sup> Be it housing, minimum wage, or social security, Friedman always opposed what he saw as possible distortion of the market. In his view, all New Deal policies were directed "against the symptoms," but "the real problem" was "poverty" as such, not the market itself.<sup>9</sup> This argument had a trenchant effect, since it basically turned common sense understandings of poverty on their head. While policy makers had become accustomed to the idea that poverty was a symptom of low wages, bad housing, and/or precarious work, Friedman had to argue that it was in fact the other way around. As he wrote in an exchange with the Keynesian economist Don Patinkin, "the social costs that are ordinarily attributed to poor housing are really the social costs of poverty." "What they justify," he continued, "is a program of establishing a minimum income and seeking to eliminate at least certain kinds of poverty."<sup>10</sup> The aim would thus become to always rely on "the price system for distribution of goods" and, if society was indeed confronted with undesirable outcomes, "achieve changes in the distribution of income by general measures superimposed on the price system."<sup>11</sup>

The general pay-off of this plan was not so much the extent to which policy-makers were to advocate equality or not (at that time even Friedman saw himself as a nominal "egalitarian") but the *means* deployed to reach this egalitarian aim. For Friedman and an increasing number of economists of his generation, reliance on the price system through the promotion of cash transfers had become an indispensable aspect of any ambitious policy agenda. Within this framework, the attraction exerted by the NIT is not unsurprising. As Friedman himself argued, the program was not only "directed specifically at the problem of poverty" but "while operating through the market," it did "not distort the market or impede its functioning" as Keynesian programs had done before.<sup>12</sup> The fresh line of "poverty" under which a citizen was to receive the NIT, one could say, operated *under* rather than *within* the market, preserving the price system and its impersonal powers of coercion, shedding the regulatory categories of the post-war welfare state.

By the mid-1960s—in tandem with the spectacular outbreak of the "poverty-issue" both in the United States and in Europe—a conception of social justice focused exclusively on cash transfers had gained predominance. Analogous to this rise of poverty *sans phrase* as a targeted concern for policy makers, however, criticisms of the market system progressively disappeared as an inherent part of our vision of social justice. The focus on the establishment of a "floor" under which nobody was to fall naturally sidelined discussion of building ceilings and the reduction of market dependency. Guaranteed Income proposals or Negative Income Tax programs became widely renowned among policy-makers and parties across the spectrum as an elegant way of articulating egalitarian considerations without assenting to large macroeconomic interventionism and intricate welfare schemes. In such an optic, the quick and enthusiastic diffusion in international institutions of the scheme first devised by Friedman during the 1970s was also the product of a conception of social justice that had undergone severe changes. The very foundation of "how" the West thought out these conceptions had been affected.

This prehistory also helps to explain a lot of contemporary UBI-activity. When we read history backward, for instance, it becomes easier to see why the current Alaska governor wants to increase the cash transfers of the Permanent Fund Dividend to its residents while at the same time make substantial cuts to public services, all with strong support from the Koch brothers.<sup>13</sup> As the *Washington Post* reported, Republican governor Mike

Dunleavy “campaigned on a promise of restoring PFDs that his predecessor had limited to help pay for government services.” The important fact here is that this is not the result of elites “capturing” an idea that was at the beginning—in the sense of it “coming from below”—a spontaneously legitimate demand, but rather the result of neoliberalism invading our very understanding of what counts as “justice.” Basic income is indeed a “rational” response to inequality, but “rational” in a very specific sense. Its program remains firmly rooted in a neoliberal understanding of social justice. As leftists, our job should be to denaturalize power relations and not always take for granted what passes as “common sense.” In the case of the UBI, this demands we reveal how the proposal came about, and how we might begin to challenge it based on this knowledge.

## Notes

1. David Zeglen, “Basic Income as Ideology from Below,” *Lateral* 7, no. 2 (2018). 
2. Oskar Lange, “On the Economic Theory of Socialism: Part One,” *The Review of Economic Studies* 4, no. 1 (Oct., 1936): 53-71. 
3. Lange, “On the Economic Theory of Socialism,” George D. H. Cole, *The Next Ten Years in British Social and Economic Policy* (London: Macmillan, 1929); Abba P. Lerner, *The Economics of Control: Principles of Welfare Economics* (New York: Macmillan, 1944). 
4. Peter Sloman, “Beveridge’s Rival: Juliet Rhys-Williams and the Campaign for Basic Income, 1942–1955,” *Contemporary British History* 30, no. 2 (2016). 
5. See: Alfred Marshall, *The Principles of Economics* (London: Macmillan, 1890); Arthur C. Pigou, *The Economics of Welfare* (London: Macmillan, 1920); and Richard H. Tawney, *Equality* (London: George Allen, 1952; first published in 1931). 
6. Tawney, *Equality*, 130–131. 
7. On the socialist calculation debate and collective decision making see Peter Boettke, ed., *Socialism and the Market: The Socialist Calculation Debate Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2000); Beatrice Cherrier and Jean-Baptiste Fleury, “Economists’ interest in collective decision after World War II: a history,” *Public Choice* 172, no. 1–2 (July 2017): 23–44. 
8. Milton Friedman, “Taxation, Poverty and Income Distribution. Tuesday April 8th, 8.30 p.m.,” Mont Pèlerin Society records Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, 5.12 Meeting File – Mont Pèlerin, Minutes, 1947. 
9. Milton Friedman, ‘The Distribution of Income and the Welfare Activities of Government’, Lecture, Wabash College, 20 June 1956, online: [https://miltonfriedman.hoover.org/friedman\\_images/Collections/2016c21/MFlecture\\_06\\_1956\\_5.pdf](https://miltonfriedman.hoover.org/friedman_images/Collections/2016c21/MFlecture_06_1956_5.pdf). 
10. Milton Friedman, Letter to don Patinkin, November 8, 1948, Box 31, File 31.24, Milton Friedman Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University. 
11. Milton Friedman, Letter to Martin Bronfenbrenner, July 18, 1947, Box 21, File 21.35, Milton Friedman Papers, Hoover Institution, Stanford University. 
12. Milton Friedman, ‘The Distribution of Income and the Welfare Activities of Government,’ 1956. 
13. Zachariah Hughes, “Alaska’s governor wants to give more cash to residents—and cut public services,” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2019. 

 [Bio](#)

### Daniel Zamora

Daniel Zamora is a sociologist at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. He works on poverty, inequality and modern intellectual history.

 [Bio](#)

**Anton Jäger**

Anton Jäger is a researcher at Cambridge University. His current doctoral project focuses on intellectual history of the Populist movement in the late nineteenth-century United States, spanning questions of political theory, economic democracy and sovereignty. He has written for several online outlets (*Jacobin Magazine*, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, *The Guardian*) and regularly writes on film for the Belgian website [Sabzian.be](#).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Tai Neilson, "Response to Lindsey Macdonald's 'We are All Housewives: Universal Basic Income as Wages for Housework,'" *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.9>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Forum: Universal Basic Income

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Response to Lindsey Macdonald's "We are All Housewives: Universal Basic Income as Wages for Housework"

Tai Neilson

**ABSTRACT** What types of subjectivities and political actors are emerging around calls for UBI? Lindsey Macdonald's article, "We Are All Housewives," eloquently speaks to the concept of universality, while also situating socialist-feminist demands for UBI within specific activist traditions. I pose questions about the distinctions between different socialist arguments for UBI and the political groups that advocate for its implementation: first, what are the differences between autonomist and feminist proposals; and, second, how might we distinguish and evaluate organizations that are fighting for a feminist-socialist UBI?

I appreciate being invited to take part in this forum on universal basic income (UBI) and to respond to [Lindsey Macdonald's article](#).<sup>1</sup> The Marxist approaches developed by the authors are diverse and compelling, and I'll engage them within this framework. My entry into debates surrounding UBI has, for the most part, come from Marxist autonomist work on labor and technology. There are significant overlaps between feminist and autonomist approaches (Silvia Federici's writing and activism are obvious examples<sup>2</sup>). Macdonald's article provides an opportunity to think through these different arguments for UBI, and consider the particularity and universality of feminist approaches.

From the outset, I should note that I am cautious about the prospects and potential of UBI. It may well be an intervention that can reduce inequalities, address stigmas and uncertainties associated with existing social welfare provisions, and facilitate more creative, freer relationships to working (and not working).<sup>3</sup> Yet, I am not convinced it is either immanently achievable or that, as a longer-term strategy, it can light our way out of the darkness of capital. As Macdonald argues, "the version of basic income we get will depend on the political forces that shape it." The likelihood of UBI and, perhaps more importantly, the ways UBI could take shape are dependent on the subjectivities and collective political actors that form around these demands.

One of the major strengths of Macdonald's argument is that it returns questions about UBI to the solid ground of women's struggles over reproductive labor and domestic work. She presents advocacy for UBI as part of the long history of movements for women's emancipation and contributes to feminist debates surrounding UBI.<sup>4</sup> For example, Macdonald identifies National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) activists, primarily black working-class women, who took their protests and demands to welfare offices in the United States in the 1960s. And she argues that they articulated critiques of the welfare state with demands to extend welfare provisions. They are presented as part of this shared political history.

By the mid-1970s these struggles constituted globalizing movements for the rights of women and domestic workers. The International Feminist Collective in Italy, England, France, and the United States launched the Wages for Housework campaign in 1972. Members of the movement, including Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Leopoldina Fortunati drew attention to women's, often individual, "invisible struggles." They did so in order to bring them out of the relative atomization of domestic life and present them as a public model for challenging patriarchy and capital. Federici, who worked in Nigeria for a time, also emphasizes women's struggles against colonialism, structural adjustments, and other threats to their livelihoods in the global South.<sup>5</sup> There are difficulties in harnessing this diverse activism to a single narrative. Yet, socialist feminist calls for UBI are strongest when they are based on a critique of specific, gendered forms of exploitation and have an organic relationship to groups that have emerged to address them.

The title of Macdonald's piece, "We are All Housewives," eloquently speaks to the concept of universality in UBI. To unpack the concept of universality we can return to Marx. For Marx, the proletariat is the "universal class" in a double sense.<sup>6</sup> In its first sense, the particular interests of the working class are, at the same time, interests common to all members of society. Similarly, socialist feminist arguments for UBI are grounded in unequal experiences of gendered distinctions that feminize reproductive work, while associating the "breadwinner" role with masculinity. They are rooted in women's struggles for the recognition and remuneration of domestic work. But, these arguments are not solely intended to remunerate the reproductive work of women nor are they restricted to a specific gender or caregiver status (as important as these goals are).<sup>7</sup> They are extended universally.

The second meaning of the "universal class," for Marx, is that a proletariat revolution would not only eliminate the conditions for the existence of the capitalist class, it would inaugurate a classless society.<sup>8</sup> Socialist feminist calls for UBI do not simply intend to mitigate the marginalization of women and the types of work that are predominantly performed by women; they are intended to undermine the links between patriarchy and capital in a way that could radically transform gender relations. On this basis, UBI should not simply make it easier for women to be caregivers but it also undermines gendered divisions of labor that associate women with care roles. In these ways, socialist feminist approaches to UBI found a universal project for emancipation in the lived experiences of women.

My questions for Macdonald revolve around the distinctions between different socialist arguments for UBI and the different political groups that advocate for its implementation. Macdonald points to divisions between proposals for UBI that emerge from those on the right, liberals, and socialists. There are also less obvious differences between arguments for UBI that come from within the socialist left. Autonomist proponents of UBI, for instance, assimilate aspects of feminist approaches to unpaid and productive work, but emphasize the ways in which new technologies expand the sphere of labor and exploitation. They argue that UBI is not a state welfare provision for the excluded, marginalized, or precarious. Rather, it is a salary for those participating in the "social factory."<sup>9</sup>

Autonomists herald the shift to post-Fordism or cognitive capitalism, which is characterized by the dispersed production and circulation of the informational, cultural, and affective commodities.<sup>10</sup> Stefano Lucarelli and Andrea Fumagalli base their argument for a universal basic income on these shifts. Under conditions of cognitive capitalism, they insist real wages are no longer indexed to productivity. UBI, then, constitutes a new model of "compensation for social productivity."<sup>11</sup> Autonomists, however, have struggled to

identify the political subjectivities or movements in which to ground these demands after the weakening of the institutions of industrial labor.<sup>12</sup> While I only have room for a brief schematic here, one task may be to map out differences between these approaches. What are the strengths of socialist feminist arguments for UBI over autonomist approaches?

Another challenge is to identify the existing groups that are fighting for the goals that could underpin a socialist feminist vision of UBI. If, as Macdonald argues, there is a shared homology between campaigns for UBI and Wages for Housework, then which organizations are the successors of the NWRO or the International Feminist Collective's Wages for Housework? For instance, based on a brief search of the major US and European organizations for UBI, Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) and United States Basic Income Guarantee (USBIG) have engaged with some feminist arguments. They also incorporate perspectives from across the political spectrum. As these are two of the largest organizations advocating UBI, we could benefit from a socialist feminist critique of their respective approaches.

To take a group which has stronger ties to working class communities, the National Domestic Workers Alliance advocates for the legal rights of both paid domestic workers and unpaid carers. Their Executive Director, Ai-jen Poo, has advocated for UBI as a key pillar alongside provisions for carers and a stronger voice for workers.<sup>13</sup> Their work intersects class, race, and gender.<sup>14</sup> Another necessary intervention, then, would be to map the terrain of these organizations, the ways they frame their advocacy, and the types of UBI they promote. Are there already organizations prioritizing a socialist feminist UBI, and by what criteria can we judge their approaches?

## Notes

1. Lindsey Macdonald "We are All Housewives: Universal Basic Income as Wages for Housework," *Lateral* 7, no. 2 (2018), <http://csalateral.org/section/universal-basic-income/basic-income-housewives-wages-housework-macdonald/>. 
2. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012). 
3. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). 
4. See, for instance: Caitlin McLean and Ailsa McKay, "Beyond Care: Expanding the Feminist Debate on Universal Basic Income," 2015, [https://www.gcu.ac.uk/wise/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/90324WiSE\\_BriefingSh](https://www.gcu.ac.uk/wise/media/gcalwebv2/theuniversity/centresprojects/wise/90324WiSE_BriefingSh) Patricia Schulz, "Universal Basic Income in a Feminist Perspective and Gender Analysis," *Global Social Policy* 17, no. 1 (2017): 89–92; Almaz Zelleke, "Feminist Political Theory and the Argument for an Unconditional Basic Income," *Policy and Politics* 39, no. 1 (2011): 27–42. 
5. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 97. 
6. Renzo Llorente, "Marx's Concept of 'Universal Class': A Rehabilitation," *Science & Society* 77, no. 4 (2013): 540. 
7. Ailsa McKay, "Rethinking Work and Income Maintenance Policy: Promoting Gender Equality through a Citizens' Basic Income," *Feminist Economics* 7, no. 1 (2001): 97–118. 
8. Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Collected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 280. 
9. Carlo Vercellone, "From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism," *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007): 13–36. 

10. Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (London: Routledge, 1996), 132–146. 
11. Stefano Lucarelli and Andrea Fumagalli, "Basic Income and Productivity in Cognitive Capitalism," *Review of Social Economy* 66, no. 1 (2008): 71–92 
12. Franco Berardi and Jack Bratich, "What About the Dark Side of Multitude?" *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2011): 310–12. 
13. Ai-jen Poo, "What a Basic Income Would Mean to Domestic Workers," *Economic Security Project*, 2017, <https://medium.com/economicsecproj/what-a-basic-income-would-mean-to-domestic-workers-69c30d6abbd2>. 
14. Asha DuMonthier, Chandra Childers, and Jessica Milli, "The Status of Black Women in the US," National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2017, [https://www.domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/SOBW\\_report2017\\_ExecutiveSummary.pdf](https://www.domesticworkers.org/sites/default/files/SOBW_report2017_ExecutiveSummary.pdf). 

 [Bio](#)

**Tai Neilson**

Tai Neilson, PhD, is a lecturer in Media in the Department of Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University. His areas of expertise include the political economy of digital media and critical cultural theory. Dr Neilson has published in *Triple-C*, *Journalism*, *Fast Capitalism*, and *Global Media Journal*. His current research focuses on the reorganisation of journalists' labour through uses of digital media.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

John Carl Baker, "Naturally Radical? A Response to Kimberly Klinger's 'Species-Being in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work,'" *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.10>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Forum: Universal Basic Income

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Naturally Radical? A Response to Kimberly Klinger's "Species-Beings in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work"

**John Carl Baker**

**ABSTRACT** In this response to Kimberly Klinger's "Species-Being in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work," John Carl Baker ties Klinger's analysis to past Marxist debates about human nature and contemporary appeals to human nature by a resurgent US left. While sympathetic to the idea that UBI speaks to a human desire for free productive activity, he critiques the notion that UBI necessarily illuminates the exploitative wage relations of capitalism. Baker proposes that regardless of the validity of Marxist conceptions of human nature, it is the materialist analysis of social relations that must take primacy in any examination of UBI or similar left policy prescriptions.

Kimberly Klinger has drawn an astute connection in "Species-Beings in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work." She suggests that rising interest in a Universal Basic Income (UBI) stems not only from the structural deficiencies of late capitalism in the Global North, but from a deeper wish for unalienated life—a chance to unlink the means of reproduction from the coerced selling of labor that defines a worker's existence in a capitalist economy. As Klinger describes it, this wish is as much cultural as it is economic, in that it is grounded in an impulse to commune with an elemental part of human existence that has been debased—exploited—under capitalism. In Marx's formulation, the human capacity for "free, conscious activity"—the ability to conceive a project and will it into existence—marks one of our defining traits as a species, as does sociality.<sup>1</sup> In concert, these traits form the basis for human productivity through social labor, which offers both the promise of socialism and the tyranny of capitalism, in which this capacity is appropriated to enrich the property-owning class. Under capitalism, workers must labor to acquire wages so they can purchase the means of reproduction and survive to continue laboring for another day. UBI seems to offer a way out of this cycle by providing cash for necessities and thereby granting the worker more control over their existence, returning them to some semblance of a true and free self.

Klinger proposes, then, that understanding the appeal of UBI requires grappling with Marxist conceptions of human nature. Althusser very famously rejected such notions entirely, arguing that Marx transcended his earlier humanism (from whence the concept of "species-being" originates) as part of his epistemological break. In Althusser's telling, Marx "broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man," with 1845 (and the sixth thesis on Feuerbach) marking the point at which he began the transition to philosophical maturity.<sup>2</sup> Althusser's work was taken up and expanded to such a degree by other theorists that Norman Geras was moved to write a succinct but fairly definitive critique of his provocative claim. Geras's *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* established that contra Althusser, the mature Marx certainly believed in and utilized a concept of human nature. Geras went further, though, arguing in

the book's final chapter that a notion of human nature is pivotal to the Marxist project. In addition to our sociality and capacity for conscious production, he notes, human beings also have basic biological needs that capitalism does not meet—a grave injustice. Without an accounting of our shared human traits, Geras contends, the Marxist case for radical social change loses much of its compelling thrust.<sup>3</sup>

Geras's critique of Althusser was published in 1983, but defenses of human nature are again popping up on the left—a phenomenon that, like interest in UBI, seems to have revived in the wake of the Great Recession. Terry Eagleton, with direct reference to Geras, included a left defense of human nature into his 2011 work *Why Marx Was Right*.<sup>4</sup> *Jacobin* editor-in-chief Bhaskar Sunkara included a celebratory entry on human nature (coauthored with Adaner Usmani) in the 2016 collection *The ABCs of Socialism*,<sup>5</sup> and in 2017 the magazine published a transcript of a talk by Usmani entitled "Why Socialists Should Believe in Human Nature."<sup>6</sup> While these arguments vary in approach, they appeal in part to the same conception of human capacity that UBI seems to address. As Sunkara writes, for example: "Our outrage that individuals are denied the right to live free and full lives is anchored in the idea that people are inherently creative and curious, and that capitalism too often stifles these qualities."<sup>7</sup> UBI, for some, constitutes a partial solution to this injustice. In theory, it provides a safe harbor from commodification—an opportunity for workers to be creative *for themselves* and partake of the realm of freedom that is time liberated from wage work.

It would be too strong to characterize this renewed mobilization of human nature as a resurgent Marxist humanism. But it does seem to be part of a general shift away from the perceived detachment of academic Marxism (of which Althusserianism is a convenient and at times understandable target) and toward a still inchoate but much more politicized "democratic socialism." This tendency, associated with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the insurgent left-wing of the Democratic Party, is self-consciously grounded in meeting basic human needs (such as healthcare and housing) and, if possible, decommodifying these essentials entirely. There is an undeniable energy behind this new wave of leftism, whose concrete goals—like Medicare for All—seek to rectify the liberal retreat from providing universal social programs for working class people. But while democratic socialism may be less than revolutionary Marxism, it is potentially more than social democracy, and to its credit refuses to let a kinder, gentler capitalism be the horizon of the possible. In democratic socialist strategy, Medicare for All isn't just palliative, but subversive. It gives recipients a glimpse of freedom from want—and a sense that another world truly is possible. In satisfying one of humankind's essential needs, in other words, it opens up a world of political and cultural possibility.<sup>8</sup>

Among democratic socialists and the broader left, UBI has never garnered the near-universal support given to Medicare for All. But proponents, such as Kathi Weeks, similarly argue that it possesses subversive as well as palliative attributes.<sup>9</sup> Klinger echoes these arguments when she writes that UBI's "greatest strength" is how it "exposes" capital's exploitation of a fundamental human characteristic, debasing our collective capacity for production and shunting us into a consumptive cycle with mere reproduction of existence as our goal. Such exposure is certainly possible, but given the many business-friendly advocates of UBI and the concept's substantial right-wing genealogy, it seems preliminary to attribute this kind of veil-lifting to the policy itself. One can certainly imagine a left program that explicitly utilized the concept to draw attention to the tyranny of wage work under capitalism, but more often, left advocates for UBI have mobilized existing theory, Marxist and otherwise, to argue for the concept's radicalism. Appeals to human nature, while often implicit, are rarely far from the surface of this

approach. Klinger's analysis, despite a commendably critical lens, seems less attentive to the idealism at the heart of such assertions.

Early in the article, Klinger uses the word "desire" to describe the human impulse to engage in conscious and free labor. If, following Geras, we accept that this forms a component of human nature—and that human nature actually exists—we are well on our way to explaining the appeal as well as the ambivalence of UBI. As a concept, UBI is compelling because it promises to break the cycle of alienated labor. But for this reason, UBI is also rather insidious. It appeals to a collective human desire that may not be met, even in part, by an actually-existing UBI. There are, for instance, right-wing and left-wing forms of UBI—as well as significant variation within each of these categories. One form of UBI might barely satisfy basic needs while subsidizing employers' low wages and justifying cuts to existing social programs. Another might be luxuriously comprehensive and supplemented by additional social provisions. These are radically different visions of a nominally singular concept. The dream of unalienated life could cause some to endorse policies that will lead to new forms of alienation and exploitation.

Klinger has thus provided an illuminating explanation of UBI's *seductiveness*. But regardless of any primal origins, it is social relations and history, including the history of the present, that determine how such a desire is taken up and for what political ends. This is why historical materialism, not conceptions of human nature (even Marxist ones), must play a dominant role in our assessment of UBI. Klinger works from this understanding, ending on an ambivalent note with reference to longshot presidential candidate and UBI advocate Andrew Yang. Yang, whose automation doomsaying and fetish for entrepreneurship marks him as an avatar for Silicon Valley capitalism, clearly demonstrates the need to assess specific UBI proposals in terms of the wider social formation they inhabit. With capital increasingly adopting UBI as part of its own platform for structural renewal, there is a significant risk the concept will be instrumentalized for regressive or even outright reactionary ends. Any program like UBI that focuses on individual satisfaction and advancement instead of collective benefit will be prone to such appropriation. Without a radical shift in social relations, UBI could produce greater atomization even as it claims to address—and theoretically *does* address—a common human desire. The new "democratic socialism" has so far resisted this pitfall by keeping UBI at arm's length, emphasizing collective material needs via policies like Medicare for All and maintaining a future-oriented focus on supplanting, rather than amending, capitalism. But it remains to be seen whether the mobilization of human nature will continue to work in support of, and not against, the pursuit of socialism. There may be a place for human nature on the left, but as the case of UBI shows, conceptual appeal is simply no substitute for a stark examination of the complex play of relations in today's social totality.

---

## Notes

1. Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 75–79. See also Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 283–287. 
2. Louis Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism," *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), 227. 
3. Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 2006), 90–116. 
4. Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 79–100. 
5. Adaner Usmani and Bhaskar Sunkara, "Socialism Sounds Good in Theory, But Doesn't Human Nature Make It Impossible to Realize?" *The ABCs of Socialism*, ed.

6. Adaner Usmani, "Why Socialists Should Believe in Human Nature," *Jacobin*, April 12, 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/04/human-nature-socialism-capitalism-greed-morality-needs>. 
7. Usmani and Sunkara, "Socialism Sounds Good in Theory," 32. 
8. Meagan Day, "Democratic Socialism, Explained by a Democratic Socialist," *Vox*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/8/1/17637028/bernie-sanders-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-cynthia-nixon-democratic-socialism-jacobin-dsa>. 
9. See, for instance, Katie Cruz, "A Feminist Case for Basic Income: An Interview With Kathi Weeks," *Critical Legal Thinking*, August 22, 2016, <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2016/08/22/feminist-case-basic-income-interview-kathi-weeks/>. 

 [Bio](#)

**John Carl Baker**

John Carl Baker holds a PhD in cultural studies from George Mason University. His works of commentary and analysis on nuclear weapons issues have appeared in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Jacobin*, *New Republic*, and other publications. The views expressed here are his own and not those of his employer.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Richard Todd Stafford, "Response to Caroline West's 'From Company Town to Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income,'" *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.11>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Forum: Universal Basic Income

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Response to Caroline West's "From Company Town to Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income"

**Richard Todd Stafford**

**ABSTRACT** This reply critically analyzes the concept of "solidarity" in Caroline West's account of the role that a Universal Basic Income (UBI) could play in Central Appalachian re-development. I argue that a robust structural form of "solidarity" would necessarily play an essential role in formulating a political bloc capable of implementing an ambitious project like a UBI. In addition to this implicit role of a structural form of solidarity that can connect various communities and constituencies together into a powerful political bloc, Caroline West also articulates an important role for highly local forms of community and solidarity in this region's transformation. Given the two distinct ways that "solidarity" functions in her account, I raise questions about how the formal features of a UBI relate to both its local and more structural forms.

Caroline West analyzes how the redistribution of capital using Universal Basic Income (UBI) could address some of the economic and developmental inequalities generated by the history of extractive relationships between urban centers and Central Appalachia.<sup>1</sup> Looking at these historically coal-dependent communities, West uses UBI to deepen our thinking about the entrenched material and cultural legacies left in "company towns" as the coal industry declines. The UBI, West argues, may offer a way to reverse deepening economic precarity in this region and enhance residents' capacity to shape the redevelopment of their communities. The implementation of a UBI, West proposes, could help to reshape these historically-constituted conditions by weakening the hold of capital over labor and, by priming the local economies with resources, could encourage the emergence of a more diverse set of economic opportunities and discourage emigration in search of work. West's analysis concludes with the suggestion that communitarian cultural residues that have escaped the pressure of the "company town" system offer social connectivity and a sense of solidarity that can facilitate a "bottom-up" refiguring of Central Appalachian life. In this response, I will take up the connections between these concepts of "community" and "solidarity" in relation to the Universal Basic Income West proposes. Though West's analysis focuses on Central Appalachia, I will additionally bring into the foreground a question that hovers at the periphery of West's account: how might we think about solidarity in the context of ongoing energy transitions more broadly?

West may have good reasons to avoid using the moral framing of "justice" in this account, but nonetheless, this analysis might be understood as a way to advance conversations about what a "just transition" could look like for historically fossil fuel-dependent communities.<sup>2</sup> As West observes, long-term patterns of impoverishment and emigration from the region were driven by the confluence of automation, the ongoing search by the coal industry for lower labor costs, and the pressure of growing environmental, occupational, and public health regulation.<sup>3</sup> Looking towards the present and immediate

future, we might add to this list the competitive pressure exerted by alternative power sources that have made employment dependent on coal extraction particularly precarious.<sup>4</sup> West's analysis of the recent history of Central Appalachia thus offers an early case study of the local impacts of energy transition that we might fruitfully relate to some other fossil fuel-dependent regions where we can anticipate similar transitions in the relatively near future.<sup>5</sup>

West observes that, as early as the 1960s, political rhetoric and actual policy constructed poverty in Appalachia as a problem to be solved from the outside, rather than a set of local issues to be addressed through the agency of those who live there.<sup>6</sup> By West's account, the shortcomings of policy responses have generated skepticism towards top-down solutions. Since the publication of "From Company Town to Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income," Phillip Lewin has built on earlier research by Rebecca Scott, Shannon Elizabeth Bell, Richard York, and others, substantiating the claim that the hegemonic cultural politics of coal in the region are supported, in part, by a sense that the federal government is a neglectful or even actively hostile force representing urban sensibilities that devalue and marginalize the region's residents.<sup>7</sup> Understandably, then, West attributes importance to identifying opportunities for "bottom-up" responses that emphasize local agency and draw upon the strength and vibrancy of local communities when constructing a future in which coal plays a significantly reduced role.<sup>8</sup> By critiquing the actual state of affairs in these communities from the perspective of UBI's potential, West challenges us to think clearly about how political projects in the present and near future will need to engage with the particularities of such historical legacies while nurturing the specific forms of agency capable of taking them on.

Even so, by drawing on Marxian critical geography, West argues that the geographical relationships between cities and rural areas like Central Appalachia should be understood as "class phenomena."<sup>9</sup> Given that this calls on us to see the problems of Central Appalachia as exemplary of broader structural features of capitalism, I ask how might we understand the connections between the specific concerns of this region and those of others who are positioned quite differently. Many fossil fuel extracting regions will engage on cultural and environmental terrains shaped by very different histories, but will face similar kinds of economic disruption in the coming years. To understand Central Appalachian social and economic conditions in terms of broader analytics of class and capitalism, rather than exclusively in terms of the region's exceptionality, particularity, singularity, or uniqueness, is to suggest that there may be meaningful ways to articulate the circumstances West observes in Central Appalachia with those found elsewhere.

But what role could West's UBI proposal play in mediating these kinds of differences? How might we make sense of the functions West attributes to "community" and "solidarity" in this mediation? To begin speaking to these questions, I will ask whether the UBI functions in West's analysis as a speculative narrative, thought experiment, or horizon towards which a politics might be constructed—or if, instead, West is describing it as a practical political project.

## Is the UBI a practical political goal or a speculative narrative about the future?

West understands the Universal Basic Income to be "universal" in the sense that it is unconditional, "basic" in the sense that it provides for "shelter, food, and clothes," and an "income" in the sense that it uses periodic cash payments to achieve these ends. Drawing on existing initiatives in the region, West gives concrete examples of how redistributing

financial resources to people could enhance capacities for self-determination and local economic control. West points, for instance, to the ways that a UBI could increase opportunities for people to pursue education, as in the example of BitSource, or facilitate the creation of small local businesses, as in the example of a local restaurant. West argues that by redistributing capital to a region that has the necessary cultural and creative resources to transition away from coal but not the means to do so, a UBI could shift power to shape the region's future away from absentee capital controlled by owners in the metropole, who have had an essentially predatory relationship to the region.

But where on the spectrum from "practical political goal" to "thought experiment" is the UBI proposal West offers? Is UBI an ambitious but relatively practical political proposal that might be added to a list of other ambitious political projects that have been taken up in recent years? Alternatively, is UBI a speculative narrative about the future that West proposes as a political horizon towards which we might orient other, more immediate projects? In the conclusion, West acknowledges some of the limitations of a UBI: "I make no claim that, in isolation, a UBI has the ability to end all poverty or create the conditions to overthrow the capitalist mode of production." West suggests that instead, we should understand it as a way of "level[ing] the playing field" and enabling poorer Appalachians to take a more active role in generating a more "diverse economy."<sup>10</sup> Thus, West distinguishes the ostensibly practical UBI from what is characterized as a less immediately achievable political horizon: the possibility that we might address all want or begin to "overthrow the capitalist mode of production." Juxtaposed with a revolution that eliminates all poverty, the UBI seems like a tenable triangulation between progressive political commitments and the politics of the possible.

Though she positions the UBI as a realistic political project that triangulates between the ideal and the possible, West may downplay the scope of mobilization and transformation necessary to arrive at this goal. West suggests that solidarities are already emerging among those who seek to envision a life after coal in the region, focusing on how these social connections could generate community-based redevelopment if there was a UBI in place; however, creating a UBI will require a political bloc with wider geographical scope than the social connections that characterize families and local communities can achieve. Rather than starting my evaluation of the UBI by asking whether or not it is a means to "create the conditions to overthrow the capitalist mode of production," I begin by asking what it would take to implement the UBI itself. My contention is that a UBI that provides for the basic necessities would require that we have already made significant progress towards transforming the capitalist mode of production before we could even begin making payments. This seems especially true if we are imagining that other existing government-provided social supports would be maintained, rather than cannibalized by this proposal.<sup>11</sup>

A universal income that could cover basic needs would require a significant enough political mobilization that economic modeling is likely less to be important to our evaluations of West's proposal than consideration of the basic political orientations and values of the polity the proposal would seek to bring into being. Even so, I offer a fairly crude set of numbers just so that we can begin to imagine the scale of the proposal. Using a figure just under the 2019 HHS federal poverty guidelines, we might imagine a UBI payment of about \$12,000 per year per person, so with 304 million US citizens (2017), the annual payment would be around \$3.65 trillion, exclusive of administrative costs.<sup>12</sup> For reference, total annual projected federal government revenues are currently around \$3.33 trillion per year, so we are talking about a pretty radical expansion of the scope of the federal government, no matter how we might achieve this kind of expenditure.<sup>13</sup> At around 18 percent of US GDP (\$19.39 trillion), the scope may initially appear to be similar

to something like Medicare for All, but the important distinction is that the Medicare for All would be transforming already-existing transfers of wealth from everyday people to the healthcare industry to payments to the government in taxes, likely with some redistribution of the burden to those most able to pay.<sup>14</sup> The scale of a UBI is not so large as to seem unthinkable, but the proposal involves an extraordinary change, to be sure.

We might imagine a UBI of this scale funded by direct taxation, with government incomes and payments in a given year somewhere close to balanced, but this would certainly require finding many new kinds of taxation, not just a progressive adjustment of marginal rates.<sup>15</sup> Carbon fee-and-dividend schemes that tax emissions simply could not generate payments close to this size, much less net benefits of this scale.<sup>16</sup> We might imagine that we could fund a UBI simply by expanding the money supply, but even under very sympathetic assumptions, this would require a degree of public intervention much larger than that to which we are accustomed.<sup>17</sup> In any case, a very different balance in the struggle over how the federal government represents the interests of the working and precarious classes versus private owners, financial capital, and the like would likely be necessary to achieve these kinds of changes to taxation or monetary policy. While it might not require an entirely different “mode of production,” it very well might require a political bloc with enough power that it could re-configure some of the essential social relations of production, circulation, and consumption, if those were the goals towards which it was oriented.

Among the most persuasively developed mechanisms for funding a UBI are proposals to make it a dividend from a consortium of state-owned enterprises, a sovereign/social wealth fund, or some combination of the two. These proposals offer a clear “on ramp” towards a full-scale UBI and could allow some degree of democratic control over a significant segment of the productive economy. Matt Bruenig, for instance, has done remarkable work envisioning how a national-scale social wealth fund could be implemented in the United States in order to pay a universal basic dividend.<sup>18</sup> In his proposal, which he calls the American Solidarity Fund, he looks towards the relatively small dividend paid by the Alaska Permanent Fund to state residents.<sup>19</sup> Alaska’s payments, to be clear, are not nearly as large as what West is proposing: at \$1100–\$2072 per person annually, they are one-sixth to one-twelfth of being a “Basic Income.” But how much capital is necessary to produce dividends of this size? Bruenig estimates Alaska’s sovereign wealth fund at 113% of the state’s Gross Domestic Product, so scaling an Alaska-type scheme to national scale, he suggests, would entail having a fund of around \$22.6 trillion. To get to a scale that is more like a “Basic Income,” we must begin imagining a fund measured in hundreds of trillions of US dollars.

The state might accumulate this kind of capital through all manner of different mechanisms, but a social wealth fund of this scale would generate a fundamentally different class dynamic: present day struggles of workers and the dispossessed against privately-held financial capital would, to a significant degree, become struggles against the state. As the proportion of production democratically controlled by the social wealth fund grows, it would eventually cease to be rational to engage in such struggle, except under very local conditions. Which is to say, while this may only constitute “socialism” under very contemporary and capacious ways of using the word to include mixed economies, we would definitely be looking at different social relations of production than the ones we have now. It is for these reasons that I argue that a UBI, especially of the scale suggested by West, would entail a radical political mobilization and/or presuppose a significant social transformation has already occurred.<sup>20</sup> Even so, West has used UBI to good effect to generate a mode of critique that holds open the possibility of change and makes visible some of the structural challenges associated with energy transition.

## How are “solidarity” and the UBI connected?

Since the UBI as a practical political project neither seems to have a political bloc capable of exerting the power necessary to make it real in the immediate future, nor a short-term mechanism through which a vast amount of socially owned wealth could be accumulated to support it, I am going to treat it now as a kind of speculative narrative about a possible future or an idealized political horizon. This reorients my response to the fundamental values that this narrative presupposes or represents. As a speculative narrative about a possible future, then, the UBI calls on us to imagine a future in which we put a significant proportion of the economy under democratic control. In this narrative, we imagine choosing to transfer these resources back out of democratic control and into the private economy. In West’s account, this would enable us to enhance local control and autonomy, encourage economic diversification, and reduce control of absentee capital in communities that have been historically dominated by energy extractive industries. Further, it would help stem the tide of emigration from this region. Of the role of community in this transition West writes,

Actualizing a bottom-up approach to economic development in Central Appalachia would need to be grounded in the cultural traditions that proceeded industrial production, namely, the strengths of community and familial relationships that can be used as a counter-weight to class stratification. Despite all the challenges Appalachian residents face with a crumbling infrastructure and few economic resources, the people in former coal mining towns have been imagining life beyond coal despite the lack of progressive governmental support.

She continues, “Solidarity is being formed through social culture and identity and the labor of the community,” giving as an example a restaurant that buys locally. Based on West’s reference to emigration, this kind of localism might both build social ties within the community and prevent the kind of generational fragmentation that has occurred in many rural communities due to emigration. Using interviews in a coal-mining town and a demographically similar town that is less directly dependent on coal, Shannon Elizabeth Bell has previously found that depopulation has significantly eroded social ties, reduced trust between neighbors, decreased the likelihood of giving or receiving mutual aid, and negatively impacted other indicators that sociologists take as representative of “social capital.”<sup>21</sup> West’s emphasis on the ways that a UBI could help stem the flow of people out of these coal-dependent communities is absolutely fundamental to understanding how the themes of community, solidarity, and the UBI are connected.

This is important because West emphasizes the role of existing social connectivity in the transition. It seems possible that, in many communities affected by energy transitions, there are residues of preindustrial community and family formations that could be the building blocks for more robust forms of solidarity, as West does. We can also observe that there are a variety of forms of community and kinship that have developed within the context of the dominant industry that help to bind people together and are not reducible to the needs of these industries. While these modes of solidarity would be inadequate to form a political bloc capable of implementing a UBI on their own, that does not seem to be West’s focus here; instead, she invites us to imagine one possible future and to think carefully about how an already implemented UBI would intersect with these forms of community and solidarity.

In accepting this invitation, I am reminded of how Raymond Williams treats the positive and negative content of “solidarity” as a concept of community. In the conclusion to his early work *Culture and Society*, he distinguishes between “the ladder,” “service,” and

“solidarity.”<sup>22</sup> For Williams, “the ladder” is the familiar form of individual striving with a community. It essentially denies “social conscience” to the individual; it both “weakens the principle of common betterment” and “sweetens the poison of hierarchy.”<sup>23</sup> Though the notion of “service” complicates liberal notions of individualism in the community, Williams suggests that it naturalizes the roles and functions of different individuals. Thus, while there is a certain degree of “personal unselfishness” involved with service, he argues that it exists “within a larger selfishness” that preserves the “status quo” but which remains unseen because it is “idealized as the necessary form of a civilization.”<sup>24</sup> It is in contrast to this that Williams develops the notion of “solidarity” as a concept of community characterized by “mutual responsibility.” Solidarity, for Williams, is a mode of cooperation that sees “the common interest as the true self-interest” and finds “individual verification primarily in the community.”<sup>25</sup> While Williams desired to bring these aspects of solidarity into a “fully democratic” future, he recognized the ways that solidarity has been historically constituted by a reactive relation, a recognition of shared conditions and experiences born of subordination within the class structure, but also often conditioned by contrasts between what is held in common and an image of an “outsider” or enemy who may not actually be identical with the ruling or owning class. Williams views the negative content of the concept of “solidarity” as something that must be overcome on the path to “a fully democratic society.” There is, on this basis, a great ambiguity in communitarian appeals to tradition: the dynamic that binds a community together often has a negative content that involves resistance to outsiders. This negative content may prove to be a barrier to articulating local struggles across space or particular conditions together. But, the “fully democratic” speculative future that Williams narrates has appeal, since it calls on us to imagine a promiscuous solidarity that transcends different particular conditions and simple modes of identification towards a more capacious “mutual responsibility.”

When West cautiously praises solidarity among those seeking to imagine futures for their communities as the era of coal comes to an end, we can see how they might be motivated by a sense of identity, shared conditions, and common sensibilities drawn from similarities of experience and geographical proximity. But Williams’s insights might caution us to be wary of a potentially dangerous countercurrent often found in this kind of communitarian social tie. A sense of regional class consciousness, which in West’s account is attributed to the historical role of urban capital in the region and partially justifies imagining a “bottom-up” transition, could under some conditions also encourage reactionary cultural insularity or even foster social exclusion. As we think about the structural similarities between Central Appalachia and other communities facing energy transitions, the question about how we might build bridges between narrower forms of local community solidarity will be crucial, if we aim towards what Williams describes as a more “fully democratic” community. While a sense of regionalist “bottom up” redevelopment doubtlessly will play a role in many of these transitions, regional or local solidarities may, on one hand, bind people together with mutual concern on the basis of what they have in common, while on the other hand, dividing them from those perceived as outsiders or blocking the articulation of shared interests between social groups who are situated quite differently, but facing structurally similar problems.

When Bruenig describes his vision of a national-scale sovereign wealth fund paying out a universal basic income as the “American Solidarity Fund,” we can see how the concept of “mutual responsibility” functions as the governing principle that connects different places and groups. Likewise, in West’s account, the UBI is the structural element that passes beyond the particular experiences of labor and precarity in a given community and addresses not just these specificities, but the broader political economic structures and tendencies highlighted by her theoretical framework. Indeed, the UBI offers an image of solidarity that includes not just workers, but also people with disabilities and the retired.

In this sense, it may indeed foster a sense of solidarity that transcends immediate social ties towards a broader sense of a shared social project that extends beyond the region and beyond the particularities of a given circumstance. Arguably, it matches the already-existing social basis of production in advanced economies with a social basis for consumption, even if the proposal does not inherently necessitate putting the social basis of production under social control. The social basis for consumption it offers is considerably more *universal* than conservative appeals to “trickle down effects,” the developmentalist focus on “rising standards of living,” and liberal means-tested welfare programs.

Even so, it strikes me as consequential that the kind of connection it offers is mediated through the market: what we share, in this narrative, is the freedom to privately choose at an individual or family-unit level from a selection of goods and commodities. In this speculative future, the universal project will be experienced in the moment of purchase. I praise West, Bruenig, and others for taking seriously the need to imagine a common cause towards which we might orient heterogenous conflicts and the needs of many communities, but I wonder what other narratives of similar ambition we leave behind if we center our attention on this story?

By preserving the structure that mediates basic survival through the mechanism of market exchange of commodities for dollars, UBI might be anticipated to underscore or even deepen the hegemonic common sense that market exchange is a natural extension of human nature—and associated ideas about what it means to be a social subject. This common sense is where “solidarity” is no longer strictly continuous with a community and something like it appears predominantly in smaller and more private social spheres: when necessity is mediated through the market, the community’s reproduction through time depends upon exchange between atomized individuals. Many participate in forms of limited community, as in the forms of sociality found among extended families, some neighbors, and some church groups. These relationships are often more characterized by care than by market relationships. But, even within a community, the proportion of relationships minimally mediated by market exchange tends to be few. Under such an arrangement, mutual responsibility to others often extends not much further than these small private spheres without an inducement to do so; indeed, the market itself may be an inducement not to do so. All of this remains speculative, though: the experiences of want, necessity, and community might emerge in new constellations in a community refigured by a UBI. These are details in the narrative that remain to be written.

I want to be clear that when we are talking at the level of envisioning possible futures, something like a UBI clearly looks superior to our current arrangements and could, I think, at least temporarily address the very serious economic precarity experienced by many in Central Appalachia and regions like it. I would also say that, if there was a political bloc capable of implementing it, UBI might offer something like a bridge, both for energy transition and towards addressing fundamental questions about how to deal with automation, how we might fairly compensate unpaid and underpaid gendered and raced labor, how to include people with disabilities and the elderly, and more. But, as we work to construct these bridges in the present, I would argue for the importance of taking stock of the alternative narratives of similar ambition and what they might mean for building and sustaining the alliances necessary to achieve lasting change.

## Conclusion: Alternative speculative futures

The kinds of sociality and subjectivity associated with a society organized around UBI might be qualitatively different than those associated with other institutions of similar ambition. As a speculative narrative about the future, it offers a relatively laudable vision:

in the future, we could extend participation in the market to those who have previously been excluded. The need to orient ourselves towards a future in which we are able to address the ongoing energy transition is quite clear: the many ways that this transition calls on us to work together across many communities to refigure our cultural, sociotechnical, and political economic arrangements are, perhaps, the defining challenges of our time. Central Appalachia gives us a case study where energy transition—at least in terms of production—is already underway, but in the coming years, the energy transition will need to extend both to the rural areas that have been directly dependent on fossil fuel extraction and, quite possibly, to the urban ones where the fabric of everyday life has been predicated on the promise of ongoing access to cheap fossil fuel energy.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps a UBI could play a part in this, but several of West's examples strike me as particularly salient to this question: what are the alternative pathways that we might choose, and what speculative narratives about the future offer the most to our understanding of the present? West points, for instance, to miner-to-coder initiatives like BitSource as “innovative” examples of how this region is already undertaking necessary economic transitions, even if it is doing so while “remain[ing] steeped in the logic of capital.” A UBI presumably would give individuals money they could choose to spend on education or help them defray the opportunity costs associated with taking lower-paying jobs that promise retraining: BitSource initially pays \$15/hour, which is below the median salary in the region and, at best, half of what the few remaining coal industry jobs in the region have, in recent years, paid.<sup>27</sup> BitSource's training is fully federally funded, then the income for jobs provided to those who complete the training is paid with a mix of public and private funds.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, BitSource is comparable with other the publicly subsidized, privately controlled coding bootcamps in the region, like Interapt's TechHire Eastern Kentucky and Mined Mines.<sup>29</sup> Though a few failures in this sector are not necessarily dispositive, Mined Mines, in particular, has come under fire for failing to place participants in jobs.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, we certainly can imagine how a UBI could help individuals afford retraining. We might nonetheless contrast this approach with programs that would seek to radically extend access to publicly provided education. There are significant differences in the kind of community implied by hoping a UBI will expand the provision of post-secondary education by enabling people to pay for it as a private good – whether provided by public-private partnerships like these coding bootcamps or tuition-funded traditional educational institutions – versus the kind of community implied by envisioning post-secondary education and training as a universally accessible social good that is free at the point of use.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, West's anecdote concerning the Heritage Kitchen restaurant illuminates the questions I am raising as they apply to food. Perhaps a UBI could facilitate the growth of a range of locally-sourced restaurants and similar businesses; I certainly can see the appeal of this kind of small-is-beautiful localist communitarianism.<sup>32</sup> In West's account, the locally owned restaurant contrasts with the kinds economic control by absentee owners that characterized the “company town” era. Indeed, Sana Saeed's documentary video for *Al Jazeera*, which West is citing, juxtaposes these local enterprises with regionally-popular transnationally controlled fast food restaurants. Underscoring the barriers to local control, West notes that Sheppard and Royse, the owners, needed to undertake “corporate labor” in the metropole to gather the capital necessary to open their restaurant.<sup>33</sup> By this account, it sounds like a major barrier for would-be local business owners is an inadequate supply of start-up capital in the region. The proliferation of artisanal restaurants competing for UBI dollars might cultivate a sense of local connectedness and the UBI might inject the capital necessary to get these kinds of enterprises off the ground. This small example helps us imagine a community structured around a robust localist market communitarianism. By way of contrast, I might try to

envision the kind of community that could be cultivated by socialized kitchens or grocers. Since the UBI involves dreaming big, are there alternative ways to deepen solidarity and address food insecurity that could help connect people across space, situation, and preference? What would they look like? I would pose the decommodification of food as a possible substitute vision. Since both alternatives are distant from material realization and are operating at the level of *narratives about possible futures*, which is the one we would prefer to work towards?

It seems plausible to think a UBI would help people in Central Appalachians access adequate housing on the private market. This is a genuinely praiseworthy goal. It could even help inject the kind of liquid capital necessary to renovate existing sub-standard housing. But is there an alternative pathway oriented towards the decommodification of shelter, perhaps in the form of high quality publicly owned housing? How might the community implied by this alternative pathway differ?

I would return to Daniel Zamora's critique of the UBI, wherein he answers the question "Isn't the best way to fight capitalism to limit the sphere in which it operates?" by reminding us that capitalism has made

market exchange the nearly exclusive means to acquire goods necessary for our reproduction. In doing so, it turned money into almost the only valid medium of exchange and it made the majority of the population dependent on capital, enforcing a fundamentally asymmetric power relation between the boss and the worker. This profoundly unequal relationship not only subordinates people within the sphere of labor, but outside it as well, through the powerful influence economic power exerts on politics, ideology, and culture.<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that decommodification of necessities is somehow an easier goal to achieve than the UBI; it may in fact be harder. But given the scale of the social transformation envisioned by a UBI, we should think carefully about which parts of social reproduction we want inside the market and which ones we do not. I am sensitive to the way that, at their best, conversations concerning the UBI draw on the incisive analysis of Marxist feminisms, "wages for housework" activism, and studies of disability and aging.<sup>35</sup> Much of the care work necessary to social reproduction has been historically set outside of the market, with the effect of cheapening it and appropriating it. But what these struggles have made clear is that we are constantly renegotiating the boundaries between the formal economic sphere and those parts of the web of life in which it is embedded and on which it depends.<sup>36</sup> The UBI offers one vision that takes this seriously and seeks to offer a more humane world in response. But an alternative narrative that could be just as a humane might seek to constrain, rather than expand, the role of the market in mediating social reproduction.

---

## Notes

1. Caroline West, "From company town to post-industrial: inquiry on the redistribution of space and capital with a Universal Basic Income," *Lateral* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2018): <http://csalateral.org/issue/7-2/basic-income-company-town-post-industrial-west/>.



2. Linda Lobao, Minyu Zhou, Mark Partridge, and Michael Betz, "Poverty, Place, and Coal Employment across Appalachia and the United States in a New Economic Era: Poverty, Place, and Coal Employment," *Rural Sociology* 81, no. 3 (September 2016): 343–86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12098>. Peter Newell and Dustin Mulvaney, "The Political Economy of the 'Just Transition,'" *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2

(2013): 132–40. Tim Forsyth, “Climate Justice Is Not Just Ice,” *Geoforum* 54 (July 2014): 230–32, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.12.008>. 

3. Like many other explorations of Universal Basic Income, this suggests that we take seriously the challenge posed by automation. But where questions concerning automation often take on a relatively abstract form and address possible future waves of automation, West implicitly suggests that the history of automation and employment in the coal industry gives us a historical case study relevant to this strand in UBI conversations. In Central Appalachia, the conditions that UBI proponents often suggest will make a UBI necessary may already exist. Of course, these arguments have been in circulation for some time, at least since André Gorz suggested UBI as an alternative to the then-dominant models of social citizenship in the France. Calls for a UBI have had to contend with the fact that, despite increasingly sophisticated and widespread automation for several decades, there is still relatively high employment. Arguments for basic incomes often suggest that the potential productivity gains of automation are masked by the creation of a panoply of “bullshit jobs” that have little social necessity. This tends to preserve the existing social order, rather than reshaping our lives around increased leisure time or encouraging us to acknowledge the importance of socially beneficial work that occurs outside of formal economic exchange. If these arguments hold water, the relative lack of economic diversity in coal dependent regions might illuminate something quite important in relation to UBI proposals: in these regions, rather than a rise in “bullshit jobs” we have seen significant numbers of unemployed people, people whose primary labor is uncompensated domestic labor, partially employed people, and emigration in search of remunerative work. West points out that we must understand the role of automation in this industry in relation to changes in global political economy and in relation to the impacts of environmental and public health regulations. Since climate change poses a global political economic challenge of possibly unprecedented scope, regulation is likely to drive fundamental transformations in carbon-intensive industries in coming years throughout the nation. We might add that unemployed demographics, such as elderly people and disabled people, make up a disproportionate part of the population in much of Central Appalachia. Thus, West’s emphasis on the importance of buffering people against unemployment in the region while generating alternative economic opportunities seems quite justified. While debates about the role of automation, global capital flows, and energy transition are often treated separately, West’s case study demonstrates one of the many ways that these questions are articulated together, intensifying the stakes of each. It is, I would argue, one of the merits of West’s use of UBI that it enables us to take seriously these interconnections and begin considering paths forward. André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (New York: Verso Books, 2010). David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.). 
4. “Lazard’s Levelized Cost of Energy Analysis—Version 12.0,” 2018, <https://www.lazard.com/perspective/levelized-cost-of-energy-and-levelized-cost-of-storage-2018/>. 
5. We might contrast this situation with the work done by Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group, whose work was initially motivated by the acceleration of oil extraction in Canada. Lynn Badia, Darin Barney, Ruth Beer, Emily Carr, Brent Bellamy, Dominic Boyer, Adam Carlson, Ann Chen, Ian Clarke, Jeff Diamanti, Rachel Havrelock, Olivia Heaney, Cymene Howe, Bob Johnson, David J

Kahane, Jordan Kinder, Richard Kover, Ernst Logar, Graeme Macdonald, Negar Mottahedeh, Michael O'Driscoll, Fiona Polack, Sina Rahmani, Jerilyn Sambrooke, Jackie Seidel, Mark Simpson, Lucie Stepanik, Janet Stewart, Imre Szeman, Kevin Taft, Michael Truscello, Aaron Veldstra, Carolyn Veldstra, Caleb Wellum, Sheena Wilson, Saulesh Yessenova, *After Oil* (Edmonton, AB: Petrocultures Research Group, 2016).



6. As West observes, the “War on Poverty” represented an effort to treat the effects of ongoing extraction of resources, exploitation of labor, and appropriation of land in the region, but it did so while only glancingly acknowledging these structural facts, using top-down decision-making, and mobilizing a pathologizing biopolitical imaginary to justify its actions. This tended to position the “deserving poor” of the region as lives to be managed, rather than as agents shaping and reshaping their own lifeworld. In efforts to imagine a just transition in the region, a negative reaction to this kind of approach has been quite evident. Take for instance, the website for the “Sustainable Williamson” project, an expansive community redevelopment project in the heart of coal-dependent Central Appalachia that is jointly supported by local government, a local health clinic, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Appalachian Regional Commission, and other entities. Today, it emphasizes a robust range of social goods, ranging from economic diversification (sustainable tourism), to public health, food access, sustainable infrastructure construction, improved education, and energy optimization. But, just a few years ago, the website explicitly articulated hostility towards federal government intervention, offering critical evaluations of the “War on Poverty” and framing its efforts with a quotation from Milton Friedman on its front page. See, for instance, para 6 and 7 in West’s essay. For Sustainable Williamson’s engagement with the War on Poverty, federal intervention, and Milton Friedman, see: “Sustainable Williamson: A gateway to sustainability in the heart of the billion dollar coalfields,” Sustainable Williamson, archived page from April 19,

2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130419194235/http://sustainablewilliamson.org/>.

Contrast this with the current page: “Sustainable Williamson: A sustainable future

for Central Appalachia,” Sustainable Williamson, accessed May 24,

2019, <https://sustainablewilliamson.org/>.

7. Phillip G. Lewin, “Coal Is Not Just a Job, It’s a Way of Life’: The Cultural Politics of Coal Production in Central Appalachia,” *Social Problems* 66, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 51–68, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spx030>. See also Rebecca Scott, “The Sociology of Coal Hollow: Safety, Othering, and Representations of Inequality,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 15, no. 1/2 (2009): 7–25. Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Richard York, “Community Economic Identity: The Coal Industry and Ideology Construction in West Virginia: Community Economic Identity,” *Rural Sociology* 75, no. 1 (January 19, 2010): 111–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2009.00004.x>.

8. Thus, the communitarian dimension of West’s understanding of Central Appalachia resonates much more with, for instance, Elizabeth Catte’s emphasis on radical collective agency than J. D. Vance’s emphasis on pathology and individual agency. Elizabeth Catte, *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2018). J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016.)



9. This analysis reflects one of the well-established approaches among scholars looking at Central Appalachia, for instance the approach taken in Austin and Clark’s account of surface mining as a metabolic relationship. Kelly Austin and Brett Clark, “Tearing Down Mountains: Using Spatial and Metabolic Analysis to Investigate the Socio-

10. West, "From company town," final paragraph. 
11. Of course, there are variants of UBI proposals that explicitly seek to reduce the scope of other publicly-provided social supports. Milton Friedman's support of Negative Income Taxes (NITs) imagined this as a way to cut social spending. UBIs function basically as NITs when there is a progressive income tax, even if there are philosophical differences between them. 2020 Democratic Presidential Candidate Andrew Yang has made providing a choice between UBI and traditional social welfare programs a key theme in his campaign. "What Is Universal Basic Income?" *Andrew Yang for President* (blog), accessed April 19, 2019, <https://www.yang2020.com/what-is-ubi/>. 
12. Census Bureau, "American FactFinder—Results," American Community Survey, 2017, accessed April 19, 2019. HHS Federal Poverty Level: "Poverty Guidelines." ASPE, November 23, 2015, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>. 
13. Congressional Budget Office, "Budget Projections Based on The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2019 to 2029," January 2019, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-01/51118-2019-01-budgetprojections.xlsx>. 
14. Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "National Health Expenditure Accounts, Historical," December 11, 2018, <https://www.cms.gov/research-statistics-data-and-systems/statistics-trends-and-reports/nationalhealthexpenddata/nationalhealthaccountshistorical.html>. 
15. Matt Bruenig offers a list of taxation possibilities for creating a Social Wealth Fund capable of paying a UBI. Matt Bruenig, "Social Wealth Fund for America," *People's Policy Project*, August 28, 2019, <https://peoplespolicyproject.org/projects/social-wealth-fund>. 
16. Kevin Ummel, "Impact of CCL's Proposed Carbon Fee and Dividend Policy: A High-Resolution Analysis of the Financial Effect on U.S. Households," *Citizens Climate Lobby*, April 2016, 48, <https://citizensclimatelobby.org/laser-talks/low-income-households-and-carbon-fee-and-dividend/>. 
17. Proponents of Modern Monetary Theory generally suggest the use of a Job Guarantee to ensure that there is an adequate supply of goods to meet increased demand. 
18. Bruenig, "Social Wealth Fund for America." 
19. The Alaska Permanent Fund, as it happens, is a fruitful example in another sense: not only does it help us imagine the scale of the transformation that West is proposing, but it also can help us clarify our thinking about how the specter of energy transition shapes the political horizon. The Alaska Permanent Fund involves taking a percentage from the total production of oil and placing it into a diversified pool of investments. Like Alaska, Central Appalachia has long seen energy extractive industries as ways to provide for social welfare. This provides a much more material reason that residents may resist or resent energy transition than accounts of the cultural politics of coal operating only at the level of identity and ideology allow. For instance, in the portions of Central Appalachia located in West Virginia, locally-provided social services (such as education, town and county roads, and local water systems) receive significant revenues from the Coal Severance Tax, the Coalbed Methane Gas Severance Tax, and the Oil and Gas Severance Tax. In the Alaskan case, a portion of fossil fuel revenue is paid into a fund, which then pays a dividend to

those who live in the state. While energy transition in the two regions is happening on very different timelines, we may observe that without a clear plan, energy transition threatens not only jobs in these communities, but also many of the social services and public goods that bind them together. Alaskans might reasonably anticipate that they will see continued profitable oil extraction for many years to come. In contrast, by many accounts, Central Appalachian coal is only economically recoverable today due to the presence of extensive already-operating fixed capital that makes it a competitive source for metallurgical coal and source for thermal coal at facilities that cannot be readily converted to cheaper fuels like natural gas; some recent accounts suggest that other energy producing technologies may have already become cheaper to install than the existing coal-based infrastructure is to operate, which would indicate that it is only a matter of time before the energy transition in this region accelerates. This is not to say that coal production is going to disappear overnight, but the time horizon across which we might imagine coal to be able to contribute indirectly to the social good is relatively short. Like Bruenig, West suggests we think of UBI at the national scale. In the context of this comparison, this is sensible: the accelerating transition to other energy sources makes vivid the need to transfer capital to such communities. Bruenig, "Social Wealth Fund for America." West Virginia State Tax Department, "Severance Taxes: Tax Data, Fiscal Years 2015-2018," 2018,

<https://tax.wv.gov/ResearchAndGovernment/Research/SeveranceTaxHistoryAndData/Pages/SeveranceTax.aspx>  
"Lazard's Levelized Cost of Energy Analysis—Version 12.0." 

20. If we looking for material and pragmatic projects to facilitate a "just transition" in Appalachia, we might focus instead on strengthening existing institutions and providing targeted investment in new capacities, which could help to cultivate a sense of participating in a shared social project: expansion of publicly funded healthcare, post-secondary education and training, childcare, food programs (like USDA The Emergency Food Access Program and Commodity Supplemental Food Program), and housing assistance would be immensely helpful. Somewhat more ambitiously, but well keyed to the needs that West identifies, we might invest heavily in green public works programs, perhaps not unlike the RECLAIM Act that West mentions or something more like a Green Tennessee Valley Authority—or, we might, incentivize new regional industries with targeted "Big Green Buys." These proposals may lack the ambition of a UBI, but might be seen as small steps in the right direction. Matt Bruenig, "Fight Climate Change with a Green Tennessee Valley Authority," *People's Policy Project*, January 29, 2019, <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/GreenTVA.pdf>.  
Christian Parenti, "Make Corporations Pay for the Green New Deal," *Jacobin*, March 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/03/green-new-deal-private-investment-energy>. 
21. Shannon Elizabeth Bell, "'There Ain't No Bond in Town Like There Used to Be': The Destruction of Social Capital in the West Virginia Coalfields," *Sociological Forum* 24, no. 3 (September 2009): 631-57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2009.01123.x>. 
22. Raymond Williams. *Culture & Society 1780-1950* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 350. 
23. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 350-351. 
24. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 349. 
25. Williams, *Culture and Society*, 352. 
26. Imre Szeman and the Petrocultures Research Group encourage cultural studies scholars to take seriously the ways that everyday lives, subjectivities, ways of making meaning, and other traditional objects of interest are predicated on fossil fuels. Toby

Miller has emphasized the importance of considering energy and other environmental dimensions in media systems, art, sport, and more. Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 805–23. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-047>. Imre Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil: On Lessons of Darkness and Black Sea Files," *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 3–15. Szeman et. al., *After Oil*. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Toby Miller, *Greenwashing Culture* (London: Routledge, 2017). Toby Miller, *Greenwashing Sport* (London: Routledge, 2017). 

27. Erica Peterson, "From coal to code: A new path for laid-off miners in Kentucky," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, May 6, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/05/06/477033781/from-coal-to-code-a-new-path-for-laid-off-miners-in-kentucky>. Lauren Smiley, "Can you teach a coal miner to code?" *Wired*, November 18, 2015, <https://www.wired.com/2015/11/can-you-teach-a-coal-miner-to-code/>. Kelvin Pollard and Linda A. Jacobsen, "The Appalachian region: A data overview from the 2013–2017 American community survey" Population Reference Bureau, prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission, May 2019. 

28. Peterson; Smiley. 

29. Hope Reese "A \$2.75M US grant plants a tech seed in eastern Kentucky," *Tech Republic*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/a-2-75m-us-grant-plants-a-tech-seed-in-eastern-kentucky/>. Elizabeth Catte, "In Appalachia, coding bootcamps that aim to retrain coal miners increasingly show themselves to be 'new collar' grifters," *Belt Magazine*, January 11, 2018, <https://beltmag.com/appalachia-coding-bootcamps/>. 

30. Catte, "In Appalachia, coding bootcamps." 

31. On the social and non-market benefits of higher education, see Walter W. McMahon, *Higher learning, greater good: the private and social benefits of higher education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). On the consequences of focusing exclusively on higher education as a private market good, see Christopher Newfield, *The great mistake: How we wrecked public universities and how we can fix them* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016) and Tressie McMillian Cottom, *Lower ed: The troubling rise of for-profit colleges in the new economy* (New York: The New Press, 2017). 

32. From an aesthetic standpoint, I certainly understand the attraction of a small Appalachian downtown populated with nice restaurants and small businesses. Maybe we could sand off some of the sharp edges of the commodification of basic necessities with a UBI while encouraging the growth of these kinds of consumer experiences. Perhaps with a UBI, we could have our small-is-beautiful localism and address want to a satisfactory extent; however, Leigh Phillips has argued that that small-is-beautiful localism can contribute to false consciousness of the scope of the environmental challenges in front of us and the need to for large scale coordination and planning to address them. Again, the question may not necessarily be an either/or choice, but I do think that we should take seriously the ways that a UBI tends to encourage a bottom-up approach to transition at a moment when, at very least, bottom-up redevelopment needs to be matched by ambitious top-down proposals. Leigh Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts: A Defence of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff* (Alresford, Hampshire UK: Zero Books, 2015). 

33. Sana Saeed, "In Appalachia, Some hope for a future without coal," *Al Jazeera America*, March 1, 2017,

34. Daniel Zamora, "The Case Against a Basic Income," trans. Jeff Bate Boerop, *Jacobin*, December 2017. <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/12/universal-basic-income-inequality-work>. 
35. On relationships between UBI, Marxist feminisms, and "wages for housework" activism see, Lindsay MacDonald, "We are all housewives: Universal Basic Income as wages for housework," *Lateral* 7, no 2 (Fall 2018). Silvia Federici, *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*, (San Francisco: PM press, 2012). Toru Yamamori, "A feminist way to unconditional basic income: Claimants unions and women's liberation movements in 1970s Britain," *Basic Income Studies* 9, no. 1-2 (2014): 1-24. Sara Cantillon and Caitlin McLean, "Basic income guarantee: The gender impact within households," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 43 (2016): 97-120. On the UBI in relation to people with disabilities, see Jennifer M Mays, "Countering disability: An alternative universal income support system based on egalitarianism." *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 18, no. 2 (2016): 106-117. In relation to the elderly, relevant empirical work has mostly focused on social pension incomes, for instance in Phillip Hessel, Mauricio Avendano, Carlos Rodríguez-Castelán, and Tobias Pfutze, "Social pension income associated with small improvements of poor older men in Colombia," *Global Health Policy* 37, no 3 (March 2018). 
36. For this formulation, I am indebted to Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso Books, 2015). 

 [Bio](#)

**Richard Todd Stafford**

Richard Todd Stafford is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University. His dissertation research examines the relationships between the discourses concerning "clean coal" and the material practices and technologies used for risk management and pollution mitigation in the coal industry. In the past year, he's been working on the [GMU Cultural Studies Colloquium podcast](#) on "Capitalism, Climate Change, and Culture," conducting interviews with Jason W. Moore, John Cook, Leigh Phillips, Christian Parenti, and doing audio work for interviews with Merlin Chowkwanyun, Toby Miller, Ashley Dawson, and Sheila Watt-Cloutier. He has previously published and presented about the politics of visual culture, especially in artistic and popular cultural engagements with the coal industry of Central Appalachia.





Robert W Gehl, "Introduction: Years in Cultural Studies," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.12>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)  
Years in Cultural Studies

## Introduction: Years in Cultural Studies

### Robert W Gehl

**ABSTRACT** This special section is another iteration of cultural studies telling its own story. In our particular iteration, we offer here essays focused on specific years in the history of cultural studies. Our aim is to provide a pedagogical resource, a place for documentation and excavation, and a forum for more storytelling.

During a panel at the 2018 Cultural Studies Association meeting, Steven Gotzler noted that "Cultural studies has always specialized in telling its own story."<sup>1</sup> Stories are powerful means for members of a field to understand their place in it, its history, and its social and political impact. We might debate the contents, narratives, or lessons the stories tell us, but we continue to tell them.

This special section of *Lateral*, "Years in Cultural Studies," is another iteration of cultural studies telling its own story. In our particular iteration, we offer here essays focused on specific years in the history of cultural studies. Our aim is to provide a pedagogical resource, a place for documentation and excavation, and a forum for more storytelling.

We see this work as heeding the call Ted Striphias made in his inaugural editorial statement as lead editor of the journal *Cultural Studies*. In "Caring for Cultural Studies," Striphias draws attention to the etymology of "culture," which implies cultivation.<sup>2</sup> He notes that such a connotation was twisted into patrician elitism by the likes of Matthew Arnold, but he also argues for the value of cultivation's connotations of growth, tending, and nurturing, a formation he calls "culture as care." Building on ideas from Phaedra Pezzullo, Achille Mbembe, and Vilém Flusser, Striphias asks, "What would it mean to imagine Cultural Studies as a 'care discipline,' or better yet as a *field* in which criticism and care cohabit?"<sup>3</sup>

Care, for Striphias, is doing needed, infrastructural work to make cultural studies happen. This infrastructural spirit animates this special section, a collection of accessible, student-friendly histories of the field that allow all of us to learn more about its intellectual genealogies, struggles, and contexts. The authors who have contributed to this "Years in Cultural Studies" project are doing this care work. And, as I will discuss below, I want to invite others from the broader cultural studies community to join them and further cultivate our field.

The "Years in Cultural Studies" project was conceived during a grad seminar on the Histories of Cultural Studies, taught in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. The course was intended to trace—as best it could, given many constraints—the history of the field, focusing on the founding the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK in the 1960s and through to the field's expansion into North America. While the course engaged with cultural studies theories

and to a lesser extent methodologies, the course was far more invested in the historical and intellectual contexts in which those theories and methods were developed.

The graduate students in the course helped develop the Years project. The students approached this in small groups. Part of this was animated by the influence of the Birmingham Centre, whose members modeled collaborative forms of scholarship—even as the collaboration became strained, acrimonious, and unequal.<sup>4</sup> Even as he trenchantly critiques much of the intellectual history of Birmingham-style cultural studies, Paul Smith notes that one redeeming quality about intellectual work at the Centre was its insistence on group collaboration in scholarship:

This [group collaboration] is one characteristic quality of British cultural studies that has not fared very well in the intervening years, and it is certainly something that did not survive its importation to the United States, where scholarship is most frequently an individualized endeavor. This is perhaps one aspect of the Centre's work that would be good to revive in the American context, as part of an effort to set a new agenda that extends and surpasses British work.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, to at least get some sense of what Birmingham-style collaboration was like, the students in Histories of Cultural Studies banded together in small groups and developed these essays, from the selection of the year to drafting to workshopping the resulting drafts. Even in the case of the solo-authored essay included from the class here, the authors workshopped their drafts and provided feedback to the rest of the groups.

In addition to predominantly working in small groups, the students also took heed of Carol Stabile's criticism of typical histories of cultural studies. In her plenary panel talk at the 2018 Cultural Studies Association conference, Stabile draws on the work of feminist philosopher Michele LeDueff to argue against the continued "virilophile preference" found in intellectual histories of cultural studies. The typical "history of cultural studies" syllabus, Stabile notes, excludes women and people of color; tokenizes topics like race, gender, and sexuality; and tends to reproduce the same citational practices (e.g., insert obligatory citation of Foucault here, insert obligatory citation of Adorno there, etc.). In sum, as Stabile argues, "By creating a tradition from which women and people of color have been vanished—by suppressing the existence of their intellectual work in the past—we facilitate the suppression of this work in the present."<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in selecting to publish this care work in *Lateral*, the authors publishing here also take heed of an anxiety expressed by Striphas, specifically that "with significant exceptions, publishing in Cultural Studies now means participating in a highly professional, capital-intensive, global operation." He refers to this as "potential" cultural studies locked behind a paywall.<sup>7</sup> Locking this work away would defeat the pedagogical purpose, which is why it is here in *Lateral*. *Lateral* is open access in more ways than one: while it free to read to anyone with Internet access, it is also just as importantly free to publish in—it does not have a "pay to publish" funding scheme. It also has a history of publishing work by graduate students. *Lateral* is a public service rendered by the Cultural Studies Association. As such, it is an ideal home for this project, which is aimed less at the "highly professional" end of Cultural Studies and more at those who want to learn more about the field, particularly students.

While they are aimed at students, the essays collected here are far from oversimplified. In the first essay to be published in this series, Mariah Wellman recovers a moment that has largely been ignored in histories of cultural studies: Stuart Hall's 1983 visit to Australia, where Hall delivered a presentation on the welfare state and encouraged Australian students to "demand equal rights as students, take control of what they're learning, and

how they are assessed.”<sup>8</sup> As Wellman shows, Hall’s visit had a direct influence on the course of the Australian iteration of Cultural Studies, influencing the creation of the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*. And, of course, Wellman considers the next stop in Hall’s global travels: Illinois, USA, where he gave a series of lectures that resulted in the posthumous publication of *Cultural Studies 1983*.<sup>9</sup> Wellman provides a concise overview of that new book, contributing to our intellectual understanding of its importance.

Additional essays from the Histories of Cultural Studies course will be published over the course of the year. These essays vary. They may stress historical moments and context or particular publications. They may focus on broad social movements or on individual scholars. They may focus strictly on the year in question or take a more expansive approach, gesturing towards genealogical influences or tracing relations forward from the year. I hope that these various approaches—and others not yet taken—provoke more contributions to this collection.

Because the work is not done. Along with the others involved in this project, including the authors of the initial essays and the broader editorial board of *Lateral*, I invite responses in future issues of *Lateral*. The authors and I fully recognize that these Years essays are incomplete. Events, concepts, publications are no doubt missed. And considering the globalization of Cultural Studies, with our positionality in the middle of the United States studying in the late 2010s, the essays here simply are not inclusive of all events in a year. Moreover, the course in which this project was conceived, Histories of Cultural Studies, predominantly focused on the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent the United States, and was limited to the years 1964 (with the founding of *The New Left Review*) to the present. Therefore, the entire history of cultural studies before “cultural studies” was named was not included, and this limitation influenced the shape of these particular essays.

Thus, contributions to this special section of *Lateral* might include:

- Responses to these essays: discussions of more publications, more social and political events, or more geopolitical contextualization. The goal of such responses would be supplemental, to build upon a collective project.
- Essays on years within the half-century history of the field formally called “cultural studies,” including the creation of university programs around the world, the publication of important texts, summaries of conferences, or historical and political contexts.
- And of course, essays on years before the formal foundation of Cultural Studies in the 1960s. We anticipate discussions of the historical and intellectual contexts that influenced the works of key figures like Antonio Gramsci. But we also reiterate Carol Stabile’s call for excavation of work outside the currently-accepted Cultural Studies canon. For example, as Stabile argues, “Black left feminists like Shirley Graham, Claudia Jones, Louise Thompson Patterson and others were intervening in culture years before cultural studies scholars made the call to do so, making anti-racist, proto-feminist culture and media in the decades before the Cold War made such work synonymous with subversion.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, our call for more Years essays is a call for more care work in our field, to add to a collective project, to set aside viriliphilism in favor of the hidden and marginalized, all with a goal to tell the cultural studies story once more and make its history even more legible to the next generation of cultural studies scholars.

---

## Notes

1. Steven Gotzler, "Catalogues of Tradition: Figurative Frames for Historicizing Cultural Studies" (presentation, Cultural Studies Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, June 2, 2018). [D](#)
2. Ted Striphas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 1 (November 8, 2018): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2018.1543716>. [D](#)
3. Striphas, "Caring," 8. [D](#)
4. For example, see Women's Studies Group, introduction to *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination* (London: Hutchinson, 1978). [D](#)
5. Paul Smith, "Birmingham–Urbana-Champaign 1964–1990; or, Cultural Studies," in *A Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Imre Szeman, Sarah Blacker, and Justin Sully (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 70, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118472262.ch4>. [D](#)
6. Carol A. Stabile, "Cultural Studies, Canons, and Coprolites" (unpublished keynote, Cultural Studies Association Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, June 2, 2018). [D](#)
7. Striphas, "Caring for Cultural Studies," 5. [D](#)
8. Mariah Wellman, "The Year in Cultural Studies: 1983," *Lateral* 8, no. 1 (2019). [D](#)
9. Stuart Hall, Jennifer Daryl Slack, and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). [D](#)
10. Stabile, "Cultural Studies." [D](#)

 [Bio](#)

**Robert W Gehl**

Robert W. Gehl is a Fulbright scholar and award-winning author whose research focuses on contemporary communication technologies. After receiving his PhD in Cultural Studies from George Mason University in 2010, he joined the faculty of the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. There, he published over two dozens articles in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Communication Theory*, *Social Media + Society*, and *Media, Culture and Society*. His books include *Reverse Engineering Social Media*, which won the Nancy Baym Book Award from the Association of Internet Researchers, and *Weaving the Dark Web*, published by MIT in 2018. He also has published a co-edited collection of essays, *Socialbots and Their Friends*. At Utah, he teaches courses on digital ethnography, the history of cultural studies, the communication technology/society relationship, and basic Web design.



Mariah L Wellman, "Years in Cultural Studies: 1983—Stuart Hall Visits Australia and North America," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.13>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

Years in Cultural Studies

## 1983—Stuart Hall Visits Australia and North America

**Mariah L. Wellman**

**ABSTRACT** Throughout 1983 Cultural Studies continued to spread outside the United Kingdom, spurred by Stuart Hall's tour of Australia and parts of the United States where he presented lectures connecting current ideas of what it means to study culture in often disparate and intense political climates across the globe. Myriad publications published in 1983 provide insight into how Cultural Studies circulated among scholars in varying disciplines while still in its infancy. This article situates Cultural Studies primarily within a North American context focusing on the pivotal event of the year: the teaching institute held prior to the 1983 conference at the University of Illinois where Hall delivered what would be eight influential lectures in the field of Cultural Studies. Further, I provide insight into an understudied conference held in Australia where Hall's impact led to the birth of an Australian Cultural Studies journal. Finally, I provide an overview of some of the pivotal publications of the year, connecting ideas of hegemony, power and dominance, reflexivity and Marxism within a western context.

Throughout 1983, cultural studies continued to spread outside the United Kingdom, spurred by Stuart Hall's tour of Australia and parts of the United States during which he presented lectures connecting current ideas of what it means to study culture in often disparate and intense political climates across the globe. Myriad articles published in 1983 provide insight into how cultural studies circulated among scholars in varying disciplines while still in its infancy. This article situates cultural studies primarily within a North American context focusing on the pivotal event of the year: the teaching institute, "Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture: Limits, Frontiers, Boundaries," held prior to the 1983 conference at the University of Illinois, where Hall delivered what would be eight influential lectures in the field of cultural studies. Further, I provide insight into an understudied conference held in Australia where Hall's impact led to the birth of an Australian cultural studies journal. Finally, I provide an overview of some of the pivotal publications of the year, which connected ideas of hegemony, power and dominance, reflexivity, and Marxism. This year is important precisely because Hall's lectures and the publications discussed below played an important role in advancing the theoretical framework for cultural studies' future scholarship. We see this in Renato Rosaldo's response to the events that occur in 1983. These important contributions to cultural studies in 1983 bolstered future publications by providing direction to scholars eager to offer their own insight on ideas central to the field.

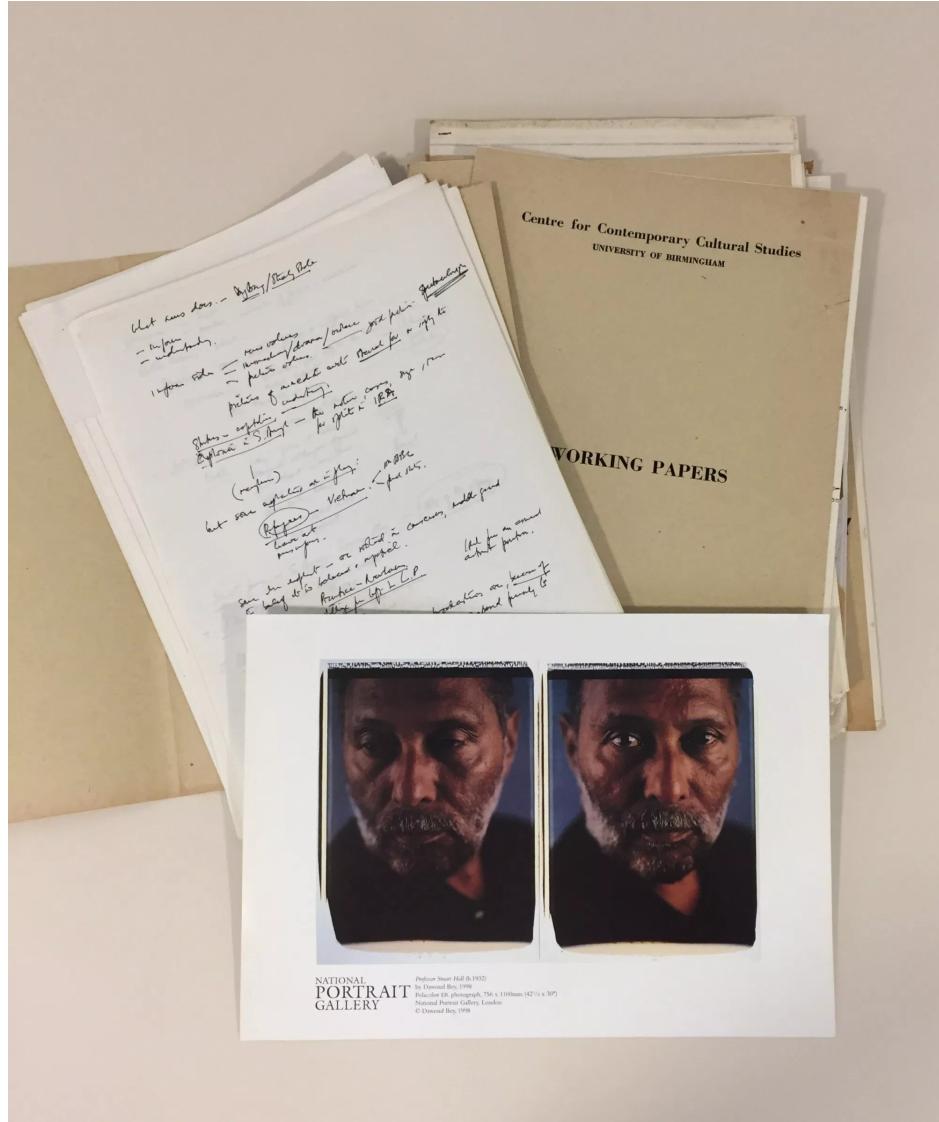


Exhibit Photograph of Stuart Hall's papers from the Cadbury Research Library's University Heritage Archive Collection, University of Birmingham, UK

In the early 1980s, cultural studies was still struggling for global recognition, including in the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>1</sup> Often utilized in smaller fields like communication studies and education within the UK, contributions made by scholars in the Birmingham Centre were not widely known by those outside the country. In July 1983, a Jamaican scholar living and teaching in England arrived on the campus of University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to deliver what would become eight foundational lectures in the field of cultural studies. Stuart Hall presented his original thoughts, connections, and assertions, which contributed greatly to the formation of cultural studies in North America. Just one month after Margaret Thatcher was unanimously elected to office again in the United Kingdom, Hall delivered his speaking series titled "Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture: Limits, Frontiers, and Boundaries," that would become an influential set of ideas impacting cultural theory still today. The effect of this series is explicated through myriad interdisciplinary publications and is evident in a particularly relevant piece by Renato Rosaldo, published in part as a response to the popularity of Hall's lectures and the conference that followed.<sup>2</sup> His talk and subsequent published manuscript in *American Anthropologist* focuses on the disruption offered by cultural studies while critiquing United States intellectual politics.

As Rosaldo's piece suggests, Hall's visit to the University of Illinois had direct effects on scholars within the United States and elsewhere, leading many to question the

interdisciplinarity of cultural studies and what kind of scholarship those with serious commitments to the field should be putting forth. 1983 is a particularly relevant year for cultural studies, bolstered by the resurgence of Hall's lectures published in a 2016 edited volume by Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg. This article questions how the publication of these lectures increased Hall's significance in this contemporary moment and adds to continuing conversations of his impact on the field.

### Hall Visits Australia

Hall's 1983 lectures are part of an introductory canon that would establish boundaries around cultural studies—boundaries that became evident through the scholarship that would surface in the coming years in the United States. However, Curthoys and Docker assert Hall's impact outside of the United Kingdom was felt by scholars even earlier, with "Cultural Studies in Australia being already a lively and varied scene, fissiparous, noisy, inchoate, its many strands ranging in theoretical approach and methodology."<sup>3</sup> Three months prior to Hall's engagement at the University of Illinois, Hall attended the Marx Symposium in Sydney Australia, hosted by Marxist journal *Australian Left Review*. There, Hall gave his main address, "For a Marxism without Guarantees," which encouraged scholars to view Marx's writings as a guide for thinking about the present day.<sup>4</sup>



"For a Marxism Without Guarantees," *Australian Left Review* 84, page 39.

Before leaving the country, Hall stopped through Canberra to give a talk at Australian National University. The university's newspaper, *Woroni*, claimed Hall's visit to campus passed "virtually unnoticed," but still, the seminar room was packed with people who heard of the event through word-of-mouth.<sup>5</sup> Hall's talk on the welfare state asserted that the threat posed by small government monetarism resulted "largely from a failure of the left of the British Labour Party to promote the notion of the State as a servant of the people."<sup>6</sup> Hall's insights throughout the talk were relevant to structures within the United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere, but situated within the context of university progress and student power. Calling for students to no longer accept that academics and bureaucrats should be solely responsible for what occurs on campus and in educational settings, Hall encouraged students to demand equal rights as students, to take control of what they're learning and how they are assessed.

Later that year, after Hall had left the country, the Australian Communication Association (ACA) Conference was held in Sydney. The discipline of mass communication studies within Australian universities was growing, thanks to the Hall-style scholarship, and the study of popular culture was gaining ground with Australian scholars. However, this

meant the group was continually at odds with the interpersonal communication studies discipline flourishing at the same time.<sup>7</sup> In a conference report, Curthoys commented on the “yawning intellectual chasm” between the two disciplines, which held entirely separate sessions throughout the conference.<sup>8</sup> Much of the debate came within mass communication over questions of popular culture, causing an uproar in various presentation panels throughout the conference. Hall’s textual study of popular culture spurred such discussion throughout many sessions, and at the end of the conference the ACA ultimately agreed to sponsor the new *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*.<sup>9</sup> One could assert Hall’s scholarship and his tour played an integral role in the furthering of cultural studies within an Australian context and was further globalized upon his arrival in the United States.

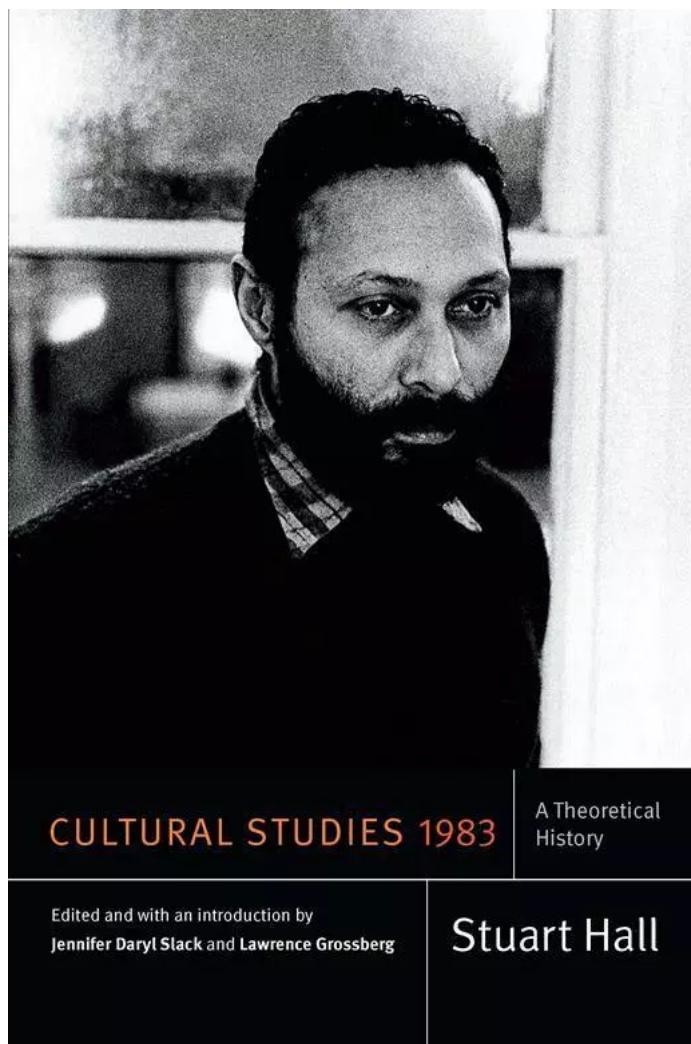
### **Hall’s Lectures at the 1983 University of Illinois Conference**

While the ACA debates were occurring in Sydney, American scholars gathered at the University of Illinois to discuss Marxist approaches within the field of cultural studies. Days before the conference was set to begin, a teaching institute was hosted where Hall was scheduled to give eight distinct lectures introducing cultural studies to Americans. Hall’s speaking series titled ‘Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture: Limits, Frontiers, and Boundaries,’ was the first sustained exposure many intellectuals had ideas coming out of the Birmingham Centre and The Open University, where Hall had been appointed Professor of Sociology in 1980. A young scholar in attendance at the institute, Jennifer Slack, asked Hall if she might be allowed to record all eight of his lectures. As if she knowingly assumed the relevance of the lectures to come, Slack sat in the front row of the lecture hall and recorded and transcribed each lecture with Hall’s permission. Later, Slack and Lawrence Grossberg would elude to the fact that they hoped the set of lectures would be turned into a book soon after the conference ended. Hall revised and edited each lecture and in 1988 wrote a preface to introduce the collection but ultimately felt the lectures were dated and no longer relevant to many conversations occurring at the time, most notably, the feminist movement.

Hall was adamant the lectures be updated before becoming available to the public. Slack and Grossberg write, “[Hall] suggested that he would want to update and extend the story, suggested that he had come to some sort of terms with developments in Cultural Studies that postdated where the lectures left out—particular chapters on post-structuralism, subjectivity, and the engagement with feminism.”<sup>10</sup> However, Slack and Grossberg insisted the lectures should stand as they were originally presented within the particular historical moment. Hall agreed to allow the collection to be published only if presented as a historical document, “as a story constructed at a particular moment and from a particular perspective about developments that by the very act of being narrated were being artificially closed, as if they were finished.”<sup>11</sup> Hall felt editing the lectures into a book gave it a level of closure intended to stand alone and not be challenged by future discussions of what constituted a theoretical history of cultural studies, and therefore, was hesitant to publish.

Shortly after the esteemed sociologist and founder of the Birmingham Centre passed away in 2014, Slack and Grossberg were granted permission from Catherine Hall to publish the collection. Slack’s transcriptions were edited minimally in order to preserve the “characteristic rhythms of Hall’s oral delivery” and published as *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*.<sup>12</sup> The edited volume was published in October 2016, two years after the scholar passed. The collection includes an introduction written by the editors as a sort of tribute to the great scholar, Hall’s original preface written in 1988, and all eight lectures given at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Functioning as a record of the event, as the editors note, rather than a theoretical position of sorts, the edition is

unique in being one of the few volumes in which Hall is the solo author and does not include collaborative work.



*Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History* published in 2016

Throughout each lecture, Hall insists that the aim of cultural studies is to entice political change, presenting a totalizing Marxist inflection. As Sergiy Yakovenko noted in a review, the book might have been named "Marxism and Cultural Studies 1983," providing a more candid indication of what is included in the volume.<sup>13</sup> The lectures function as an intervention into debates facing cultural theorists after World War II. In Lecture One, Hall makes the crucial point of referring to cultural studies as a political project rather than intellectual pursuit. The intellectual notes the importance of Richard Hoggart, diving into Hoggart's past and how his working-class upbringing lead him to include a groundbreaking method of research where he studied individuals in an observational way, similar to reading prose. Similarly, Hall tips his hat to Raymond Williams and ideas of culture and its connection to lived experiences. Time and again, Hall introduces the key thinkers integral to the foundation of cultural studies and the Birmingham Centre to his audience at Illinois.

Hall includes equally broad and complicated ideas of dominant ideology and hegemony, providing genealogical connections between various historical contexts. In Lectures Five and Six, Hall addresses Althusser, ideology, and articulation; much of the lectures were reorganized and published in "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates."<sup>14</sup> In these lectures, Hall speaks specifically toward his own Blackness to illustrate the work of both ideology and articulation in ways new to his

audience. Similarly, ideas brought forth in Hall's Lecture Seven on Gramsci, ideological struggle, and cultural resistance was soon after published in "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity."<sup>15</sup> Much of Hall's lecture series were transformed into published works that would become influential to many future scholars including Slack and Grossberg.

While many lectures were later published, some of the lectures addressed concerned spoken about on Hall's previous Australian tour, particular in connection to Marx's strengths and weaknesses. As noted by Curthoys & Docker, Hall speaks directly to Marx in the fourth lecture given at Illinois, asserting that capitalism uses and builds upon different forms of labor, rather than eroding the particularities of different forms of labor.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Hall argues, exploiting indigenous labor and material resources. In Lecture Three, Hall focuses on the non-Marxist sources of structuralist thinking, particularly focusing on the works of Durkheim and Levi-Strauss. Hall addressed the work of Durkheim in marking the connections between cultural theory and sociology, presumably to provide contextual references for his American audience. In a review of Hall's lectures, Sofia Ropek Hewson notes, "theories may be layered on top of each other, they may share the same discourses, but we still need new ones, particularly in times of significant political change."<sup>17</sup> Hall often connected cultural studies to well-known theories and theorists in other disciplines as a way to further explain how one might approach cultural analysis. This tactic was evident throughout pivotal publications in 1983.

## 1983: Pivotal Publications on Culture

Various articles influenced by cultural studies were published in 1983, including pivotal publications by James Carey, Geert Hofstede, Justin Wren-Lewis, and Richard Johnson. With their disparate backgrounds and training, the scholars provided insight into how ideas within the discipline were being taken up by those in Birmingham, the United States, and elsewhere. In a short article published in the *Journal of Communication* in the summer of 1983, James W. Carey articulated the struggle of American cultural studies to fully grasp concepts integral to the origins of the field, mainly power, dominance, subordination, and ideology.<sup>18</sup> Published within weeks of Hall's visit to the University of Illinois, Carey touches on the beginnings of cultural studies in Britain as a response to political conditions of that particular moment, contrasting with what was occurring within the United States. Further, Carey calls for scholars to produce a "vocabulary through what it is possible *in principle* to think of the mass media in relation to everything else . . . that does not artificially constrain one from thinking of the mass media in their widest possible context."<sup>19</sup> This call would reinvigorate scholars to consider questions of power and dominance when examining societies structured in and by communication.

The year 1983 marks cultural studies' expansion beyond communication and into the realm of business management. Dutch scholar Geert Hofstede, author of the 1980 seminal work "Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values,"<sup>20</sup> published "The Cultural Relativity of Organizational Practices and Theories" in the *Journal of International Business Studies*.<sup>21</sup> The influential article would go on to win the journal's "Decade Award," which recognizes the article from each year that has had the greatest impact on future scholarship in the decade that followed. Calling for scholars to avoid the ethnocentrism present in current management theories within psychology and sociology, Hofstede's 1983 article summarized the scholar's previously published research exploring the work-related values of employees from 50 countries.<sup>22</sup> Hofstede used his four dimensions of national culture to explain differences in management styles and organizational tactics in workplaces around the globe. His argument, that these activities are culturally dependent, provided a new framework for understanding and

managing intercultural negotiations, as well as improving multicultural organizations like the United Nations.

In the early 1970s, Hall published the first rendition of his encoding/decoding theory highlighting the importance of active recipient interpretation within mass communication messages.<sup>23</sup> This model was used in myriad works to follow, including that of Charlotte Brundson and David Morley.<sup>24</sup> Justin Wren-Lewis published a response to Hall's piece in 1983, suggesting Hall's piece was simply a "semiological conception."<sup>25</sup> Despite Hall's efforts to emphasize agency of audiences, Wren-Lewis argues that the model characterizes television in a way that suggests it reproduces meanings already held, rather than producing new meaning. Ultimately, Wren-Lewis argues that the practice of decoding requires appropriately theorized conceptions of audiences along with empirical studies, such as interviews, in order to bridge the gap between what he believes to be the overtheorized encoding and textual analysis aspects of research and the undertheorized ideas of decoding presented in Morley's work.<sup>26</sup>

#### ENCODING AND DECODING IN THE TELEVISION DISCOURSE

Paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on  
"Training In The Critical Reading of Television  
Language".

Organised by the Council & The Centre for Mass  
Communication Research, University of Leicester,  
September 1973.

Stuart Hall  
Centre for Contemporary Cultural  
Studies,  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham B15 2TT

© CCCS & author

Original 1973 Typescript Title Page: "Encoding and Decoding in The Television Discourse" by Stuart Hall

Finally, Richard Johnson's working paper "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" attempts to deconstruct the history of cultural studies and how the discipline grew out of literary criticism.<sup>27</sup> Connecting ideas to Marxism, mass culture, and the work of the communist party, Johnson's article would go on to be published in *Social Text* in the winter of 1986 and become a canonical text within the field.<sup>28</sup> Johnson sums up the three approaches for cultural studies—production-based, text-based, and studies of lived culture—ultimately arguing that combining all three approaches is an inadequate direction for the future and thus, scholars must continue refining how they study the life cycle of cultural objects.<sup>29</sup> This text would resurface more than ten years later in the paramount project, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of The Sony Walkman*.<sup>30</sup>

### Future Exploration of The Year in Cultural Studies: 1983

The events and publications of 1983 are disparate, yet each contribution continues to expand the field of cultural studies into unexplored geographic and intellectual spaces. While this review is not comprehensive, it provides a starting point from which to understand the process of thinkers like Stuart Hall and the impact their ideas continue to have today. Publications like those of Rosaldo and others, along with the 2016 publication of Hall's lectures, explicate the importance of the year 1983 to cultural studies today. The contributions of Carey, Hofstede, Wren-Lewis, and Johnson to the contemporary moment endure through conversations by those both within and outside of cultural studies. There are many changes between what concerned cultural studies in 1983 and what we are concerned with today. The pieces referenced in this article remind us that cultural studies requires significant periods or moments where reflection, renewal, and re-composition

(or de-composition) are necessary to the relationship between the concept of cultural studies as a conversation and cultural studies' methodology of conjunctural analysis.

Although this essay focused on Hall, Hall himself resisted such hagiography. Therefore, other work on 1983 should explore the various contributions made throughout the year beyond Hall. This review is centered within Western culture, but that is not to suggest important work was not occurring elsewhere. Scholars might consider furthering the work submitted here by exploring historical events in other areas of the world that surely impacted the scholarship published in 1983 and beyond. This project would benefit from an in-depth look at the political climate surrounding the Birmingham School throughout 1983 with the reelection of Margaret Thatcher. While this project elected to focus on how cultural studies expanded outside of the United Kingdom, it is important to analyze the environment from which the ideology came in order to garner a more complete understanding of how the field has changed over time.

---

## Notes

1. Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 
2. Rosaldo, Renato, "Whose Cultural Studies?" *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 524–529. 
3. Ann Curthoys and John Docker, "Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies, circa 1983," *Cultural Studies Review* 23, no. 2 (2017): 165. 
4. Stuart Hall, "For a Marxism without Guarantees," *Australian Left Review* 84 (1983): 38–43. 
5. "Stuart Hall on the Welfare State," *Woroni*, 26 April 1983, Trove, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/134418639?searchTerm=stuart%20hall%20&searchLimits=l-decade#>. 
6. "Stuart Hall on the Welfare State." 
7. Steven Maras, "Thinking about the History of the ANZCA: An Australian Perspective," *Australian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 2 (2004): 13–51. 
8. Ann Curthoys, "'I Want to Disagree with Everything That's Been Said So Far': The Australian Communication Association Conference," *Listening Post* 46 (1983): 21–22. 
9. Curthoys and Docker, "Stuart Hall." 
10. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg, "Introduction" in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, by Stuart Hall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), x in the "Editor's Introduction." 
11. Slack and Grossberg, "Introduction," x. 
12. Slack and Grossberg, "Introduction," xiii. 
13. Sergiy Yakovenko, "Yakovenko on Hall, 'Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History,'" *H-Russia* 232 (2016), <https://networks.h-net.org/node/10000/reviews/162181/yakovenko-hall-cultural-studies-1983-theoretical-history>. 
14. Stuart Hall, "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2, no. 2 (1985): 91–114. 
15. Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27. 
16. Curthoys and Docker, "Stuart Hall," 167. 
17. Sofia Ropek Hewson, review of *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, by Stuart Hall, *LSE Review of Books*, March 2017,

18. James W. Carey, "The Origins of the Radical Discourse on Cultural Studies in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 33, no. 3 (1983): 311–313. 
19. Carey, "Origins," 313. 
20. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1980). 
21. Geert Hofstede, "The Cultural Relativity of Organizational Practices and Theories," *Journal of International Business Studies* 14, no. 2 (1983): 75–89. 
22. Hofstede, "Cultural Relativity." 
23. Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Working paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on "Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language," September 1973. 
24. Charlotte Brundson and David Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide* (London: British Film Institute, 1978); David Morley, "The 'Nationwide' Audience: A Critical Postscript," in *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 111–122. 
25. Justin Wren-Lewis, "The Encoding/Decoding Model: Criticisms and Redevelopments for Research on Decoding," *Media, Culture, and Society* 5, no. 2 (1983): 179–197. 
26. Wren-Lewis, "The Encoding/Decoding Model." 
27. Richard Johnson, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*, 1983. 
28. Richard Johnson, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Social Text* 16 (1986): 38–80, doi:10.2307/466285. 
29. Johnson, "What," *Social Text*. 
30. Paul Du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda James, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negua, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of The Sony Walkman*, Culture, Media, and Identities (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, in association with The Open University, 1997). 

 [Bio](#)

**Mariah L. Wellman**

Mariah Wellman (MA, University of Iowa) is a PhD student in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah. Her research interests include social media, microcelebrity, and health.





Nick Marsellas, "Review of 'Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy,' edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.14>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Review of *Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy*, edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn (Palgrave Macmillan)

**Nick Marsellas**

**ABSTRACT** In this edited collection, Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn draw together cutting-edge thinkers on queer pedagogy and queer activist praxis in an effort to dismantle the historical underpinnings of education as a tool of oppression. As an alternative to normative education, the editor offer up queer pedagogy as a methodology for "challenging accepted hierarchies, binaries, and hegemonies that have long dominated pedagogy and praxis" (5). The collection features the queering of traditionally normative classroom and academic spaces alongside queer approaches towards less commonly acknowledged sites of learning, such as social media websites, community advocacy meetings, and prisons.

*Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy*. Edited by Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, XIV, 334 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978-3-319-64622-0. US List: \$119.00.

In this edited collection, Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers, and Joshua O. Lunn draw together cutting-edge thinkers on queer pedagogy and queer activist praxis in an effort to dismantle the historical underpinnings of education as a tool of oppression. While few of the contributing authors in this book explicitly cite critical pedagogy, that tradition of thought has been so formative to queer pedagogical frameworks as to hardly need citation. As an alternative to normative education, McNeil, Wermers, and Lunn offer up queer pedagogy as a methodology for "challenging accepted hierarchies, binaries, and hegemonies that have long dominated pedagogy and praxis" (5). The collection features the queering of traditionally normative classroom and academic spaces alongside queer approaches towards less commonly acknowledged sites of learning, such as social media websites, community advocacy meetings, and prisons.

Large concepts like "queer" and "praxis" hold the book together thematically, while the sections of the book draw the arguments of each author's chapter into larger threads. The text begins by highlighting the queer potential within educational systems and the danger of invoking this queerness uncritically. Authors invoke "queer"'s expansive capacity to hold all those who do not fit into cisgender normative constructions of the self while also reminding readers that queer students still face very real challenges as a result of their queerness that other students do not. The collection then extends the scope of pedagogy "to consider how we might learn to be queer in public spaces" (8). This expands our understanding of pedagogy to encompass the various ways that we are enculturated into normativity and subsequently discover our escape from it. After centering the wide-ranging category of learning, the collection shifts to a focus on teaching, beginning with

classroom educators and expanding to activist and nontraditional lineages of knowledge and tactic sharing.

The important work of the earlier chapters' interventions into normative pedagogical paradigms reappears in and informs the latter chapters' expansion of "queer pedagogy" into the realm of praxis and activism. Katie Goldstein writes about queer resistance to housing insecurity through the proliferation of queer communal homes in Brooklyn. Educators Elizabeth McNeil and Joshua O. Lunn (one free and the other incarcerated) compose a conversation as they teach "queer thought in the radical context of the prison," ultimately making a powerful case for such radical reform that the prison system would be unrecognizable (12). The academic writing is also refreshingly interspersed with alternatives to traditional academic prose. The collection excerpts some of the best creative nonfiction sections of Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer*, recomposed to accentuate the embodied quality of learning and teaching. The volume also closes with a beautiful textual collage by Aneil Rallin asking what we might learn if we were to truly open ourselves to learning from our histories of pain and tragedy, human and otherwise. Rallin pushes the limits of normative understanding, drawing connections between whale suicides, climate violence, homophobia, and the queer teen deaths that precipitated Dan Savage's *It Gets Better* movement.

While the book does important work in both the realms of praxis and pedagogy, the joining of the two concepts could have been stronger, especially with regard to the pedagogical implications of the queer praxis chapters. Many of the most interesting chapters that emphasize queer praxis outside of the traditional classroom are unfortunately absent of explicit connections to pedagogy. While pedagogically-minded readers will have no problem discerning the implications for themselves, readers have missed the opportunity to hear exactly what connections the authors had in mind between their work and the collection's theme of pedagogy. Likewise, those writing on more traditional sites of pedagogy tended to overlook concerns of praxis not immediately apparent in the classroom. Overall, this critique is a minor one, especially when weighed against the benefit of having a variety of voices contributing thoughtfully to such large concepts as queer pedagogy and praxis.

Identifying the intended audience for this particular book is challenging. On the one hand, queer is an expansive category not dependent on identity (in their chapter, McBeth and Paulin "flirt with the idea that all students in the first-year class are Queer" (60)). Likewise, pedagogy has its role not just in classrooms but in nearly every facet of our lives, and the same can certainly be said of activist praxis. Many of the authors in this book acknowledge these larger audiences; no one who has read Freire or hooks would be lost in this book. On the other hand, there is something quite powerful about understanding a text as written by queer educators for queer educators to educate in ways that align with the political nature of their queerness. Perhaps I will leave it at this: the audience for this book is anyone who would benefit from unlearning the indoctrination of homophobic, transmisogynist systems and who would like strategies for keeping these thought patterns out of their own teaching/mentoring/activism.



#### **Nick Marsellas**

Nick Marsellas is a graduate student and teaching fellow at the University of Pittsburgh. His work interrogates ethical dilemmas and opportunities that arise from teaching queer topics in the undergraduate writing classroom.

More broadly, his work examines the effects of white-nationalist mobilization and transphobia on university classrooms and policies.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Helen Kapstein, "Review of 'Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain' by Mohan Ambikaipaker (University of Pennsylvania Press)," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.15>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Review of *Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain* by Mohan Ambikaipaker (University of Pennsylvania Press)

**Helen Kapstein**

**ABSTRACT** Mohan Ambikaipaker's "Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain" is distinctive both for its setting and for its personal engagement. Ambikaipaker practiced "activist anthropology" by carrying out "observant participation" as a caseworker for the Newham Monitoring Project, a community activism organization, over the course of two years. The book alternates between anecdotal accounts of racism and the author's theoretical and historical framing of those accounts. Ambikaipaker's writing is compelling, his theoretical grounding is thorough, his empathy is apparent, and the fieldwork underpinning it is considerable and consequential.

*Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain*. By Mohan Ambikaipaker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 254 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 9780812250305. US List: \$65.00.

In a line-up from the University of Pennsylvania Press's Ethnography of Political Violence series that skews heavily towards books about occupied territories and genocides, Mohan Ambikaipaker's *Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain* shines through, distinctive both for its setting and for its personal engagement.

The book begins as it means to go on, with a specific story that ends tragically about racist harassment in the London suburb of Newham. By giving Amina's "parable" to us first, Ambikaipaker deliberately prioritizes her narrative over his own, in keeping with his goal of examining the "lived experiences of racial violence and racialized state violence as well as the lived experience of engaging in antiracist activism" (xiii). To achieve this, Ambikaipaker practiced "activist anthropology" by carrying out "observant participation" as a caseworker for the Newham Monitoring Project, a community activism organization, over the course of two years (xiii). The book alternates between anecdotal accounts of racism and the author's theoretical and historical framing of those accounts. Despite the particularity of individual stories (or perhaps because of them), Ambikaipaker's ambition is broad: to perform "a critical analysis of the western liberal social order in Britain" (24).

By practicing ethnography in the place where it might not normally be expected, Ambikaipaker actively works against the idea that it is a "colonial form of knowledge production" (xiii). He also demonstrates just how postcolonial, multiracial, diverse, and whatever other synonym you want to insert here Britain is today. This is a direct result of empire and its legacies, and yet Ambikaipaker shows how much the state and its narratives rely on "a forgetting of the British Empire" (20). Instead, black Britons are reconstrued as "immigrants and interlopers" (20), and thereby excluded from power sharing in an environment predicated on "everyday political whiteness" (26),

Ambikaipaker's pithy coinage that sums up the ways in which ideological and repressive state apparatuses align to prefer whites and whiteness.

Ambikaipaker's frankness about the complicated position he has put himself in, including the gap between his expectations of his embedded experience and its realities, is a big part of the appeal of this book. He encounters racism amongst the targets of racism, he discovers that official antiracist processes are often "race-making sites," and he struggles to enter and reside in Britain in the political atmosphere after the War on Terror (xiii). As a result of these ambiguities and impediments, he says, "I did not encounter myself as different from other black people who were similarly struggling to make social meaning and achieve political resolution about their collective...struggles with British racism" (37).

That said, Ambikaipaker *is* different from his informants, by virtue of his temporary assignment, his education and profession, and, for some, his class and gender. These differences poignantly manifest themselves when he realizes he has polished off the food in a household stricken by food scarcity. The inclusion of this moment in the book demonstrates Ambikaipaker's self-awareness; his insertion in their lives has real effects and real limits. Keen to put his interviewees on a level playing field with himself, he gives them a voice frequently and often at length. For instance, here's part of what Sarah says about one experience as a Muslim woman: "They could have easily hit us, but why didn't they hit us, the women in the family? The only explanation I have in my head was physically we didn't look different. Coz the men did, they had their beards. Us, the women in the house, didn't have no scarves or nothing, we didn't have our scarves" (146-47). Quotations such as this make me wonder about the ethics of verbatim quoting. Yes, Sarah has a voice, but she sounds less eloquent than the author does. On the other hand, Ambikaipaker characterizes these narratives not as voices but as "screams," which he says we must develop a capacity for listening to so as to become accountable to their sufferings and hopes. Screams aren't supposed to be eloquent.

The counter to "everyday political whiteness," according to the author, is "political blackness," and Ambikaipaker is good about explaining why he has landed on that term, what critiques of it exist, and how he counters those critiques (78). Ultimately, political blackness for him is "a practical possibility," and it's through this lens that we see his unfolding understanding of the situation and its contexts (78).

The first three chapters of the book establish the terms of the debate and offer examples of individual struggles against racism and racial violence. The second three chapters move away from colonial racist hangovers into a discussion of being Muslim in a time of high anxiety about terrorism and the justifications for violence and intolerance that allows a society to make. The book operates on many levels—it's a history of the NMP (which sometimes goes a little too deep into the weeds), it's a theory of cultural anthropology, it's an indictment of the British state's maintenance of institutional racism, and it's a call to "[show] up and...forge solidarities that do not as yet exist" (202). It's rare that I find an academic book I'm interested in reading from cover to cover, but this is that rare thing. Ambikaipaker's writing is compelling, his theoretical grounding is thorough, his empathy is apparent, and the fieldwork underpinning it is considerable and consequential.

 [Bio](#)

**Helen Kapstein**

Helen Kapstein is an Associate Professor in the English Department at John Jay College, The City University of New York. She earned her PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. A postcolonial scholar, her areas of interest include South African literature and culture,

cultural and media studies, and tourism and museum studies. Her book *Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces* was published in 2017 by Rowman & Littlefield International. Current projects include a postcolonial reading of the Brontes' juvenilia and a series of essays on Nigerian petrofiction. Her work has appeared in *Postcolonial Text, English Studies in Canada, and Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, among other venues. She serves on CUNY's University Faculty Senate and is Vice President of the Cultural Studies Association.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Brendan Cook, "Review of 'Declarations of Dependence: Money, Politics, and the Aesthetics of Care' by Scott Ferguson (University of Nebraska Press)," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.16>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Review of *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Politics, and the Aesthetics of Care* by Scott Ferguson (University of Nebraska Press)

Brendan Cook

**ABSTRACT** Scott Ferguson explores the implications of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) for contemporary metaphysics and aesthetics. He asserts that only MMT can rescue society from neoliberal austerity by realizing the potential of money as a boundless public resource with an infinite capacity to serve human and environmental needs. In order to explain the resistance to MMT, Ferguson retraces the prevailing understanding of the money form to the political crises of the fourteenth-century republic of Florence. He presents the art of the Florentine renaissance as a response to these crises and the expression of the obsession with *haecceity*, or 'thisness', which has obscured money's restorative potential for centuries. He also suggests that the sacramental theology of the thirteenth-century Dominican friar St. Thomas Aquinas offers a potential path out of the intellectual blind alley of *haecceity*, towards a just, tolerant, and ecologically sustainable future.

*Declarations of Dependence: Money, Politics, and the Aesthetics of Care*. By Scott Ferguson. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press. pp. 222 (paper). ISBN 978-1-4962-0192-8. US List \$20.00.

In *Declarations of Dependence*, Scott Ferguson successfully navigates the double challenge of critical scholarship, that of blending discursive inquiry and focused polemic. Subtitled *Money, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Care*, the second title in the University of Nebraska's freshly minted *Provocations* series manages both to open paths for future investigation and also to craft an argument with immediate political relevance. What is more, Ferguson—in full disclosure a colleague, friend, and occasional collaborator—has achieved this balancing act without circumscribing the range of his inquiries. In the course of this brief text, so brief it sometimes feels compressed or truncated, he articulates a critique of neoliberal austerity through a wide range of cultural objects. The book opens with an invocation of the 2015 James Bond film *Spectre* and then proceeds to explore the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). It reaches its apogee with the visual art of renaissance Florence, and it concludes with a surprisingly poignant presentation of the 2014 animated feature *Big Hero 6*. Perhaps the most admirable quality of this defiantly original work is that it incorporates these disparate elements in such a way that their inclusion seems natural, and even inevitable.

Ferguson's secret here is to lean into what might appear the weakest, or at least the most controversial point in his entire argument. From the very first page, a short, pungent "provocation" riddled with exclamation marks, Ferguson proclaims his allegiance to the heterodox school of economic thought known as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT). Above all else, *Declarations of Dependence* strives to demonstrate the potential of MMT and to cast it as the only viable answer to neoliberal scarcity and underemployment.

Ferguson is aware that he will invite skepticism when he invokes MMT economists such as Scott Fullwiler, Randall L. Wray, and Stephanie Kelton (2–3). He acknowledges that their claims—money a public utility, government spending not tied to taxation—have been derided on both the left and the right (29–31). Ferguson nonetheless insists that only MMT offers a path to a humane and ecologically sustainable future (4–6). And it is this effort to defend and validate MMT's insights which leads Ferguson into the vital heart of his book.

For the critics of MMT, Ferguson has an original and compelling answer, one grounded less in theory than in history. MMT invites skepticism, he argues, because it contradicts a series of premises which have been woven into the fabric of Western thought so long that they not only go uncontested, but even unexamined. We are inclined to doubt MMT's claim that governments "can generate money *out of thin air*" because we have internalized a system of metaphysics which renders anything approaching this impossible (4). By historicizing the attitudes which have impeded the acceptance of MMT, Ferguson deprives them of their status as universal and self-evident axioms. And so the central chapters of *Declarations of Dependence* unravel the consensus of the last seven centuries, tracing the modern money form back to the crucible of modernity, the fourteenth-century city-state of Florence.

A digression into renaissance history might seem out of place in a book which speaks directly to the era of Occupy and Black Lives Matter, but Ferguson strives to demonstrate that the Florentine story belongs, in some sense, to the present moment. In a condensed account which sometimes simplifies but which never distorts, he summarizes the last fifty years of historiography to reveal how the essential features of modernity were born out of the turbulent politics of the late-medieval merchant republic. As Florence became both the center of renewed international commerce and the seat of a newly dominant mercantile and financial elite, changing social conditions gave birth to a novel mode of thought. The Florentine scholar-politicians and the artists they supported developed an orientation towards metaphysics and aesthetics which Ferguson describes as *haecceity*, or 'thisness', a term borrowed from their contemporary, the English Franciscan William of Ockham (d. 1347) (136–38). In the arts, *haecceity* propelled the "gravitropic visuality" of painters like Giotto and Masaccio (146). In political economy, it conceived of money as "a private, finite, and alienable *quantum of value*" which must first be obtained from private individuals through taxation or borrowing before it can be expended on the public good (xi, 184). As the social order which first took shape in Florence established itself across the rest of Europe, Florentine *haecceity* followed close behind (140–41).

For Ferguson, the subsequent history of the West reveals the triumph of *haecceity*, which might be defined as an obsession with the concrete, the tangible, and the immediate at the expense of abstraction (125–26). At once a consequence and also a cause of the anxieties of bourgeois civilization, *haecceity* fuels both the visceral immediacy which has characterized so much of Western art from Michelangelo to Michael Bay, and the fixation on austerity, debt, and taxation which finds its most extreme expression in the recent excesses of neoliberalism. More specifically, *haecceity* has obscured what Ferguson considers the central promise of MMT: that money can function as a potentially limitless public resource with "unrestricted capacity to socialize labor and accommodate myriad social differences" (6).

Since Ferguson locates our current predicament in the past, it should come as no surprise that he discovers the solution there as well. To explore alternatives to the *haecceity*-driven metaphysics of the last seven centuries, he reaches back even further, to the later thirteenth century and to the sacrament theology of Thomas Aquinas. Ferguson finds a historical analogy to the implied metaphysics of MMT in the system which the Dominican

master developed in response to contemporary problems of distance and mediation. In the Thomist model, the Eucharist possesses many of the qualities which MMT attributes to the money form: it is effectively limitless, it is present everywhere without occupying any point in space, and it is the site of universal mediation and salvation (116–19). While Ferguson falls short of asserting that Thomism can provide a philosophical foundation for MMT, he implicitly recommends it as a starting point. At the very least, Aquinas has the advantage of predating Florentine *haecceity*. Because he has not internalized the premises which make MMT seem so unlikely today, his metaphysics is not inconsistent with what Ferguson considers money's true potential.

For such a short book—well under two hundred pages—*Declarations of Dependence* is surprisingly rich in provocations. Even apart from his advocacy of Thomism, there is Ferguson's repeated assertion that Marxism is as much a child of *haecceity* as neoliberalism (xi, 5, 140–41, 184). Few readers will assent to everything here, but that is not the test of a book like this. As with the other entries in UNP's new series, the object is to initiate conversation, or even to instigate longer, more focused studies. It would be interesting to see MMT economists accept Ferguson's invitation to wrestle with the metaphysical underpinnings of their own theories. And historians of late medieval and early renaissance Europe could test, complicate, and extend his observations on the emergence of *haecceity* during the long crisis of the fourteenth century. And then there is Ferguson himself. One can hope that his next book will be longer and more fully developed, offering a richer elaboration of the intriguing suggestions sketched out here.

 [Bio](#)

**Brendan Cook**

Brendan Cook is a Senior Instructor in Humanities and Cultural Studies at the University of South Florida. He holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of Toronto. His translation of the correspondence of the fifteenth-century Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla was published in 2014 by Harvard University Press as part of the *I Tatti Renaissance Library*.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Wei-Ping Chen, "Review of Review of 'Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age' by Michel Feher (Zone Books)," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.17>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Review of *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* by Michel Feher (Zone Books)

**Wei-Ping Chen**

**ABSTRACT** Michel Feher's new book "Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age" offers both critical evaluations and political discussions of the existing socio-economic theories about the dynamics of capitalism in the past half-century and the possible alternative directions current capitalism could take. Feher argues that whether we are a company in search of funding from shareholders, an indebted public authority seeking bondholders, or an instrumentally precarious individual in need of social benefits, we would all be subject to the issue of accreditation and indebtedness, in which being an investee is more appreciated in an age in which investors have become all-powerful.

*Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age*. By Michel Feher. New York, NY: Zone Book, 2018, 192 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 9781942130123. US List: \$25.95.

Michel Feher's new book *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* offers both critical evaluations and political discussions of the existing socio-economic theories about the dynamics of capitalism in the past half-century and the possible alternative directions current capitalism could take. His original and timely contribution lies in the argument that we can move beyond neoliberalism once we know how to use it as the source of resistance.

Feher's analysis centers on the transformation of global economic organizations and actors towards a form of capitalism structured by the dynamics between "investors" and "investees." Consequently, companies, states, and individuals are all preoccupied with hyperfinancialization in the context of the neoliberal project where the accumulation of reputation under the guise of self-responsibility, renders them attractive to investors. They hope not so much to increase profits from the gap between sales revenues and production costs over the long term, but rather to maximize credit from projects continuously submitted for evaluation that enable them to continue conducting economic activities within a short period. Such a transformation of the form of capitalism thus shifts the social struggles from a fairer distribution of profits between capital owners and workers to the condition upon which investors agree to allocate their credit to those investees deemed credit-worthy.

The book consists of an introductory chapter and three analytical chapters that successively focus on corporate governance, governmental policy, and individual conduct. Feher argues that whether we are a company in search of funding from shareholders, an indebted public authority seeking bondholders, or an instrumentally precarious individual in need of social benefits, we would all be subject to the issue of accreditation and indebtedness, in which being an investee is more appreciated in an age in which investors have become all-powerful. This entrepreneurial ethos penetrates all levels of social life

and leads to acute contradictions between a company's dual objective of meeting both financial expectations and corporate social responsibility, between the pressure on a state to sustain both the trust of lenders and constituents' support for future elections, and between individuals' sense of self-entrepreneurship and the insecurities that occur in daily social life. Feher's reflections unfold through references to a trans-disciplinary range of theorists and to analyses of debt in the current conjuncture. They include Wolfgang Streeck, Benjamin Lemoine, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Maurizio Lazzarato, David Graeber, and Andrew Ross. As a part of the broader conversation around debt, Feher reformulates the political resistances and aspirations anchored in well-documented recent cases.

Far from being a purely scholarly issue, the divergence between the neoliberal project and its consequences indeed leads to severe political and social implications. Feher's work calls for attention to current financial capitalism not only through a descriptive and analytic diagnosis but also through the strategic reorientation of social movements. By recalling how the labor movement of industrial capitalism negotiated the value of its labor power instead of persuading employers to forsake their quest for profits, Feher's suggestion to investee activism today is to play the game with the current financial market, and, more precisely, to alter the conditions of accreditation through different evaluative criteria. For example, the "Defund DAPL" campaign was launched after a controversial construction project following the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This campaign targets the speculation of shareholders and the financial market at large, encouraging them to withdraw funding for an environmentally racist project for fear of losing reputation and money. In addition, when confronted with the Uberization of consumer goods and services such as shared car rides or home delivery, the platform cooperativism of self-employed contractors suggests, in part, that they should be requalified as salaried. Uberized service enterprises are mainly financed and dominated by venture capitalists. As such, the requalification of contract-based work as salaried does not reflect an aspiration to wage relations but reflects the governments' attention to and support for the welfare of workers whose platform cooperativism represents an engagement in an alternative, worker-owned rating system without intermediaries in the supply chain.

Feher builds a constant analogy between labor activism and investee activism; the effectiveness of both is based on an apparent paradox because what they bargain for, whether better remuneration or better rating criteria, is the motor of their exploitation. However, this point also raises some questions. For example, various occupation-based movements seek better conditions under which popular sovereignty is delegated by attacking the subordination of elected officials and private companies to the demands of financial institutions; according to Feher, such movements do not anticipate radical change. Similarly, in the case of the platform cooperativism, whether the digital co-ops can represent an effective challenge to digital predators still suggests another strenuous fight. As Feher is already aware and has clearly demonstrated in his work, the examination of the relationship between investors and investees by no means suggests that the workers, or more precisely, the investees, would be less exploited today than before; what, then, is the extent of mobilization to which investees could aspire? How do investees respond to the punitive regulations adopted by public or private authorities against their activism?

Considering the mobilization of investees, the diversity within such a category, and even the overlapping roles of investors and investees or investees and workers, makes it somewhat difficult to imagine their common goals and solidarity. From this point of view, the ways in which actors are confronted with and address this dilemma warrant closer study. To return to the title and main argument of this book, the contemporary rated

agency fashioned by credit-worthiness is dispersed across every level of social structures, and Feher paves a solid path with the appropriate theoretical framework and convincing examples to identify the mobilized actors. The notion of “investees” thus avoids, to some degree, the argument of possible variations occurring within such a social category, thereby helping us to reassess and question various current social struggles on a continuum. As a book predicated on the task of radical thought, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age* presents the melancholy of neoliberal societies with some imaginatively and engaginglycharted paths for those feeling disempowered. Reading this book thus results in several mixed feelings. For activists and policy makers, this book offers a provoking blueprint to reevaluate plans and goals. For scholars of culture, this book offers the conceptual link of investee politics with which researchers can explore, for instance, the tension between social welfare and the increasing demand for flexibility, work conditions and activism, and the financialized dimension of everyday life, as the rating contributes to the dynamics of speculation on the attractiveness of projects of any kind, be they monetary or moral, collective, or personal.

 [Bio](#)

### Wei-Ping Chen

Wei-Ping Chen is a PhD candidate in sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris. Her research focuses on the intertwining of consumerist capitalism, media culture, gender, intimate relationships, and emotions.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053

Yadira Gamez, "Review of 'Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces' by Helen Kapstein (Rowman & Littlefield International)," *Lateral* 8.1 (2019).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.18>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 8.1 (Spring 2019)

## Review of *Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces* by Helen Kapstein (Rowman & Littlefield International)

**Yadira Gamez**

**ABSTRACT** Helen Kapstein's book *Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces* positions tourism as a form of colonialism. Specifically, the author lays out the similarities between different forms of modern day tourism and how they reflect colonial practices, with reference to three foundational values: surveillance, control, and consumption. Kapstein's book is a riveting read and is perfect for those interested in post-colonialism, tourism, the creation of real and imagined spaces and desire studies.

*Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces*. By Helen Kapstein." London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, 226 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978-1-78348-640 8. US List: \$120.00. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-78348-646-5 US List: \$39.95

Helen Kapstein's book *Postcolonial Nations, Islands, and Tourism: Reading Real and Imagined Spaces* positions tourism as a form of colonialism. Through various spaces, real and imagined, Kapstein takes the reader on a journey to show how tourism is "a potential practice of nation formation" (xix). Specifically, the author lays out the similarities between different forms of modern day tourism and how they reflect colonial practices. Kapstein notes that tourism and colonialism have three foundational values: surveillance, control, and consumption. After connecting colonialism and tourism through the concept of practice, Kapstein specifies that she is interested in islands and how they are shaped by this relationship. Building on work such as that by Pete Hay, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Robert Knox, Kapstein positions her contributions within the field of tourism and island studies, expanding the field by furthering the study of real spaces. Yet, Kapstein also deepens the analysis of imagined spaces in order to show how they can be helpful in finding meaning within real spaces.

Each of the five chapters focuses on a different real or imagined space that Kapstein emphasizes to deepen her analysis and further her overall argument. Chapter 1 "A Literature of Failure: Reading *Foe* and *Defoe*" focuses on comparing and contrasting Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and J. M. Coetzee's novel that rewrites it, entitled *Foe*. Through these two novels, Kapstein establishes how tourism works and how the tourist creates the boundaries and image of the island. The protagonist of *Robinson Crusoe* can be read as a colonialist disguised as a tourist. Crusoe spends his time in the novel making items without purpose. His constant making severs the meaningful connection between tourism and labor. *Foe* similarly demonstrates the colonialist disguised as tourist but through a noticeable lack of action. *Foe*'s colonialist efforts do not involve as much labor

as they do in *Robinson Crusoe*, but both novels demonstrate how the tourist's visit creates an unstable zone which primes the island's national identity for change. The tourist's demands must be met by the island labor, which in turns impacts how the nation creates its own identity.

In Chapter 2 "On Seeing England for the First Time (Again)" Kapstein demonstrates how imagined spaces can reflect real spaces. The focus of this chapter is Julian Barnes's novel *England England* which, Kapstein argues, takes real events and reimagines them through the tourist gaze. Events seen from the perspective of the tourist gain new life as market relations. In this way, distortion becomes a tradition that turns England into a "ready-made product available for consumption" for tourists (31). For Kapstein, *England England* demonstrates how a space becomes vulnerable to tourism and how its history, romanticized through tradition, can serve to reorient a space for touristic practices. A section of Chapter 2 is focused on Banksy's art installation Dismaland, and its financial success and popularity. This opens the question of whether or not the long lines, rude service, and technical difficulties tourists experienced at Dismaland were poignant criticisms or a case of supply and demand for unique touristic experiences.

Kapstein's third chapter, "A New Kind of Safari": Gunesekera's Sri Lanka" is organized around Romesh Gunesekera's writings including *Reef*, *Heaven's Edge*, and *Noontide Toll*. Kapstein argues that Gunesekera's fictions are used as real histories, which impacts how the Sri Lankan national narrative is created. At the base of Kapstein's analysis is Gunesekera's use of back drop which he either ignores, or selects from and manipulates in his novels; the texts' historical authority is derived from the fact that the author is actually from the country he is writing about.

Chapter 4: "The Rim of Things" and Chapter 5: "Every Native Would Like a Tour" focuses on Kapstein's investigation into Robben Island in South Africa. First a colony for outcasts such as lepers, later a prison, and today a tourist attraction based on this history. Kapstein spends two chapters detailing how tourists have impacted how Robben Island operates and the importance of Robben Island to tourists. Tourists who visit Robben Island are looking for a specific kind of experience and everything from the souvenirs to the lectures given by former wardens produces a flattened-out experience of the island as a purely touristic space.

Kapstein's book is a riveting read and is vital for those interested in the study of post-colonialism, tourism, desire, and the creation of real and imagined spaces. Kapstein keeps theoretical jargon to a minimum which makes the book accessible to a range of readers in the fields with which her book intersects. The introduction, "On Violence and Visuality," orients the reader to these fields with some introductory material before she dives into the content of the study. Specifically, a current state of the field of island studies and its influences is given along with a brief overview of the factors that contribute to making an island. Kapstein's use of various primary sources from art installations to visitor feedback reports is a refreshing reprieve from route literary sources. Overall, this well written book will make a wonderful addition to any scholar's book shelf.

 [Bio](#)

**Yadira Gamez**

Yadira Gamez is a first year PhD student in the English Department at Texas A&M University. As a first generation academic, her goal is to be an English professor at a minority serving institution. Gamez's research interest is firmly centered in the intersectionality of gender and race in 20th century

literature, but more broadly speaking she is interested in cultural studies and minority literature.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053